

Hartal Again, Why?

From the abjectly punishing programmes that opposition political parties announce from time to time and get away with unscathed conscience, it seems they have taken the country and its people for granted. The economy for them is a donkey ready to be pummelled at will. BNP's latest hartal scheduled for July 16 comes to serve as a poignant reminder of this oft-visiting realisation. For every hartal is a whiplash on country's emaciated economy. The political opposition BNP does have the right to criticise the government and lend voice to people's grievances and sufferings but how can a call for paralysing the country for whatever period of time be a solution to such ordeals? So what other purpose a hartal serves? Sensitising people? Are not the people direct sufferers of the problems in the utilities sector or price hike? Do they need to be told that they are suffering? Even if that point of view is accommodated for the sake of argument, the question that still looms large is: at what cost? Who gave any political party the right to inconvenience people and cause damage to our economy and resources?

That our politicians are woefully short of ideas to strike a balance between their party agenda and national good becomes manifest in the sly imagination that goes into fixing the hartal dates. To the best of our knowledge all BNP hartals have so far been immaculately scheduled for Thursdays. With a two-day weekend following, a hartal on Thursday, even a half-day one, in effect, turns out to be a fulsome hartal. It is a terrific boost to delinquency with people based outside Dhaka making the most of this undeserved and unscheduled holiday. No matter what the leaders have to say a half-day hartal on Thursday is contrived with a view to incensitising the people to be shirkers. This is politics gone mad. The Daily Star has been crusading against this haemorrhagic madness right from its inception. We take pride in the fact that we have consistently and relentlessly condemned hartal all through the last several years. To the tribute of our obsessed myopic politicians that struggle of ours has remained as valid as it was seven years ago.

Death Trap Labs

There is hardly a man or woman who hasn't visited a doctor or will not in a lifetime. And there is hardly a doctor who will not call for detailed and many-faceted reports of wide-ranging pathological tests. It is a fact that a great many pathological labs do not have the right equipment for the tests they do as borne out by the report on the subject in yesterday's Daily Star. And the report says many labs do not have a recognised pathologist. No wonder tests done by different labs of the same specimen, hardly give the same reading. Which one shall the doctor go by? He or she may not have a problem here. The doctor accepts only the reports by a lab he or she had referred the patient to irrespective of the dependability of the same. This is allegedly because the labs pay the doctors money pro rata over the business given.

This is verily a nether world of medicine. There are pathological labs, which, not engaging any recognised pathologist, get all their blank printed report sheets signed by one such on payment of money. This is inconceivable. But not quite so if the whole array of improprieties resorted to by our sons and daughters of Hippocrates are gone through. That is a difficult proposition. But the loss of lakhs and lakhs of patients by Bangladesh doctors to their Indian counterparts is a confirmation of the bad things.

Time was when Dhaka was a city of so-called Chinese restaurants. And then came a time video clubs became the most ubiquitous thing. Now the pathological or diagnostic laboratories have taken their place — about 600 of them are on the government registry. And The Daily Star report suspects that the actual number may be three times that.

It is exclusively the government's responsibility to immediately shut all the unregistered labs and also to ensure that the registered ones have all the required equipment and enough qualified pathologists not only to sign reports but more to monitor and supervise the technicians' work. For the maximum dependability of the reports, the labs may compete among themselves. But the minimum standard must be ensured by the government.

Damsel in Custody

We find the report on a forlorn young girl who has been languishing in the safe custody of Cox's Bazaar police station for last one and a half months quite disturbing. It says police is looking for her guardians to hand her over. This is strange. Why a woman just because she is a woman has to be handed over to somebody? Why she, in a sound state of mind and body, cannot be left alone or be allowed to live on her own? If we are really serious about women's emancipation and empowerment, these are the questions institutions and individuals alike have to encounter fairly and squarely.

Having said that we are not making light of the perilous reality that surrounds women. Ours is a society that has seen an orgy of horrendous crimes against women. Specially in the recent times. Were it not for the vigilance of the press and the women's rights activists one shudders to think of the number of crimes that would have gone unreported, unheard of.

It looks like the press has done its bit in this case. Some women's rights group should start from where the fourth estate has left off. One month is more than enough time for close relatives to track their lost ones specially when that missing person is under the care of an agency with a definite identity and address. Police verification has found out that the checked address is not tallying with the one she gave. Either she is lying for reasons best known to her or she is in a state of mental shock and agitation not to be able to talk sensibly. In either case it should be of little use for her to be in police custody. We suggest she be handed over to some women's rights group. She may not have any one to claim her at the moment but she can definitely be equipped to be able to take care of herself.

Getting Together and Going Ahead

Some poor are "like us", but poorer than us, but the ultra poor are "different". They are socially peripheral including the landless, the low-caste, the widows or abandoned women, the tribals and nomads.

POVERTY is a growth industry. National and international development agencies are all engaged in this enterprise. Numeric professionals are busy refining measurement indices and churning out numbers. Even a dilettante like me has also been drawn in.

Let me give a brief background. Mr. McNamara's famous Nairobi speech, where he spelt out the misery and deprivation of small farmers, can be taken as a rough indicator of the discovery of rural poverty by the international agencies. Soon after, in 1975, Administration Committee for Coordination (ACC) of the United Nations appointed a task-force for recommending measures to improve coordination of the UN system in the field of rural development. Twenty UN agencies participated and World Bank was the lead agency. The task-force decided to invite an independent practitioners from a developing country to make an assessment of the systems' rural development activities with special focus on the rural poor.

I was then at Harvard on a sabbatical leave from the government of Bangladesh. My good friend Thomas Hexner of Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID) suggested to Leif Christoffersen, then Assistant Director Development of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Bank, that I was eminently qualified for the task. After all I had worked as the disciple of Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan in Comilla and was involved in facilitating the formation of small farmers' cooperatives. Beside, at that very moment I was Secretary to the Government in the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. More importantly I am from a poor country, Bangladesh. So I was contracted for an investigative study on "Poverty Oriented Rural Development and the UN Family of Nations."

Anyway between 1975 and early 1976 my collaborator Tom and I travelled all over Washington and New York, Paris, Geneva and Rome, had meetings and discussions with different UN agencies and programmes and familiarised ourselves with their perceptions and predilections. Finally, based on individual agency self-evaluations we completed the study by adding our own critique for whatever they were worth.

The poor, however, were never consulted. Why should they be? They were the objects of development — the target group. After all the study was agency-centred and the focus was on inter-agency coordination for recipient-oriented development cooperation. But when the beneficiaries are dumb and voiceless, it is incumbent upon the wise and the knowledgeable to make decisions for them!

Be that as it may, the fees that I received from World Bank allowed me to put my two boys through college at least for the initial years. Since then the horizon of the Nairobi Speech has been broadened to go beyond the small farmers to those with little or no access to productive resources. The face of poverty has also become more feminine. And nature, the new poor, have joined the ranks of the old sub-human humans. All that is admirably summed up in the current developmental rhetoric: pro-poor, pro-women, pro-nature.

Refinements have been made in indices for measurement. Standard measure of consumption and/or income flows has been expanded to include Physical Quality of Life Index. Unfortunately even that cannot capture fully the poor's own perceptions of security in livelihood, the sense of freedom from harassment and a abuse at home and work, the feeling of dignity in day to day work, the belief in the reliability of the officialdom. Indira Hirway writes about the distaste her respondents felt for debts, not just because of high interest rates, or forced labour from family members, but also because what followed from them — "abuses and insults", "helplessness and pain", and "touching the feet of the lenders and swallowing abuses." (Economic and Political Weekly, March 30, 1985). The problem is that such humiliating subservience is difficult to quantify.

Hence the McNamara fallacy as mentioned in Adam Smith's Super Money: "Whatever cannot be easily measured does not really exist."

However that may be, there has been a further recognition that the poor are not homogenous. Some poor are "like us", but poorer than us, but the ultra poor are "different". They are socially peripheral including the landless, the low-caste, the widows or abandoned women, the tribals and nomads. Many are physically on the fringe — on the edge of habitats or in between villages or just floating like water hyacinth. There are many biases against outsiders seeing them. Quite often they are missed out in census counting.

In that context it must be recognised that the issue of freedom to live long and well by substantial parts of population is not a matter of income alone. As Dr. Amartya Sen puts it succinctly, many things that affect our lives deeply, especially in poor countries, depends greatly on public support, e.g., availability of health services, access to education, having an epidemic free surrounding, living in a safe and sound environment. The crucial role of public action is both in the sense of state activities in support of entitlements of different sections of the population and in the sense of people's own ability to demand attention and to secure a response from those in authority.

But how can a person who is demobilised, fragmented and dependent free her/himself to join with others? The marginal peasant and the landless poor may not often be a simple wage worker to a single land owner; he may be a share cropper/casual labourer to many employers or a guest labourer (an euphemism for bonded labour) where he and his family can eat and sometimes earn a little money. The occupation of selling labour being a lonely one, the poor are divided among themselves and are vulnerable to retaliation by the local power holders if they join together or speak out. The strategy of "Voice" is risky and the poor cannot afford risks. For example, when the West Bengal Government first tried to register share croppers so that they would hand over only the legal maximum of one quarter of the crops to their land-lords instead of the traditional one-half, some share-croppers pleaded "with tears in their eyes" not to be registered. They feared the insecurity which might follow if they alienated the land-lord — the loss of loan to meet contingency needs such as when food ran out, a child was sick, a dowry had to be found or a ceremony performed. (Robert Chambers).

Yet, to my mind, it is a partial view. The human subject is at the centre of many different social relations and situated at various and specific cultural contexts. Reducing her/him to only one, namely economic determinism, either in the first or in the ultimate instance, glosses over other relationships like love, friendship, fraternity, neighbourhood etc. True human history begins only when people begin to create and shape freely themselves and the world around them.

values which serve the future of self and society. But when the outside support carries with it implicit power relation through which outside decisions become controlling, it undermines the empowerment of the powerless and the sustainability of local efforts. It is only through solidarity groups that the inferior poor can break out of their closure, exclusion and objectification. People who have been systematically degraded and oppressed may sometimes be implicated in their own oppression. But to say that there is nothing but the implication of the slave with the master is extremely reductionist. It is a highly unstable theory about the poor which has to assume that vast numbers of the little people, mentally equipped as you or I, can be systematically duped into misrecognising their own interests. It is true that "if people are hungry ill-clad, unsheltered or diseased, nothing is so important as to remedy this condition... It will be time to worry about leisure, contemplation, the appreciation of beauty and other higher purposes of life when every one has had a decent meal" (J K Galbraith).

The hesitant ones became bolder as they saw

their peer-groups within their own village and across registering and organising themselves. By sharing experiences of such groups, they came to understand how to demand attention to their needs and secure a response from the local authorities. Good legislation is not enough, it requires the organisation of the poor to realise what is legally due to them.

Another example from a non-supportive local power-structure is recounted in BRAC's documentation, "The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages" 1980. Field workers of BRAC went to work with the landless and the poor tribals in ten villages in the wake of a severe drought and near-famine situation in 1979. Their strategy was to get the landless organised within and across villages around collective productive activities, initially by pooling their own resources and later supported by government resources from food for works programme.

Soon they realised that much of the government resources was intercepted by a small number of powerful people. Over one period only 24 per cent of the food sanctioned by the government had been redistributed, the remainder being trapped by a net of local power holders. In order to get more resources through, it was not only essential to get the landless to organise, it was important to understand the system clearly.

Wrote a BRAC staff member: "The first stage was to record carefully all the examples of exploitative and illegal activities we could find. We did not go out to look for them very much, the landless and the poor, who were the principal victims, came to us and as our study continued their interest and analytical capacity increased to the point where they gave us pen and paper and insisted that we record everything. Of course none of the incidents recorded were new to them; they knew those things better than us. Previously everyone knew some of the things that were going on because they were right in front of him, but it was in a shadowy, partial way. By adding his knowledge to that of others

and then by analysing they could see in a clear open way for the first time and so realistically consider the possibility of change."

In other words by linking incidents and activities from their own and adjacent villages, by comparing what happens with what is supposed to happen and above all by sharing among themselves their experiences of the facts and the norms, the poor tribals could develop a new and shared consciousness. The apathy and acquiescence of the poor due to extreme demobilisation and isolated privateness have given way to a similar perception of injustice and a confidence for common action for change."

The BRAC example makes it clear that power does not radiate from the State or the Sovereign or the centralised instances of power alone. It is a reciprocal interplay between centres of authority and discipline covering the relations of everyday life at various sites. This is what Michael Foucault calls the microphysics of power. A great many social, cultural, even everyday practices are to be transformed for the socio-political and economic conditions to change fundamentally.

Hence, the importance of segregated and autonomous social movements, of organisations by the poor themselves to transform the existing power relations without any overarching mediation. The possibility to hold a limited perspective and the need to defend a space for more immediate molecular efforts may be more relevant and pragmatic for the oppressed who are scattered all over a country. In fact such initiatives are not only worthwhile in themselves but they may also contribute in various ways to the large process of breaking down institutionalised oppression. It is true that whether or not such possibilities are realised depends on the degree to which the central power-apparatus of a state allows for the expression of these desires. State-power can and sometimes do stamp out local popular movements or coopt them. Therefore, the more plural the voices, the longer will be the chains of equivalences with other such articulations. That will deepen the democratic process, thereby making it more difficult to neutralise certain aspirations and struggles. Societal aggression, aggression by powerful individuals or groups and by the state can bring out unsuspected capacities for resistance and common action.

Solidarity, thus generated, can be a more than adequate proxy for security. Latent subjectivity of the poor which has been brutally objectified by downward directed power emerges through human relatedness. Subjectivity enlarges itself through intersubjectivity. Self as a centre of relationships serve as the underpinning of group-solidarity. The real struggle is between the possessiveness of the private ego and the open-mindedness of the true self.

Outside knowledge and information is important for the members of a group to evaluate their existing conditions and choose life-enhancing

How can a person who is demobilised, fragmented and dependent free her/himself to join with others? The marginal peasant and the landless poor may not often be a simple wage worker to a single land owner; he may be a share cropper/casual labourer to many employers or a guest labourer (an euphemism for bonded labour) where he and his family can eat and sometimes earn a little money.

Opening of Bridge on Jamuna Perspectives of a Historic Achievement

The bulk of the work, was carried out during the regime of Begum Khaleda Zia. The project was incorporated in the 5th Five Year Plan with a ratified financial allocation. The Project Proposal was for the first time approved by the ECNEC. Serious negotiations were carried out with the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and Japan with high level visits which included the visit of the World Bank President Louis Preston to Dhaka.

BANGABANDHU Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge was inaugurated on the 23rd June amidst befitting fanfare, as expected. And why not? The occasion represented the commissioning of the largest multipurpose bridge in the country, nay in the region itself. Its multi-dimensional usefulness for the people in general and those in the north-eastern region of the country in particular is fathomless. It will also work as a gargantuan catalyst to integrate people of the land separated by the great divide of its mighty rivers. Plenty has been written and spoken about the enormous benefits the bridge will entail for the people of the country and of the region itself. Let us not recount them. Our remarks may now be confined to the historical perspectives of the bridge and the manner it was reflected at its inauguration.

Construction of a bridge on mighty Jamuna had been a big demand of the people, specially from those of the north-western part of the country, since the very partition of British India in 1947. It was also conceived by the Majlum Jananeta Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, who publicly demanded it as early as in 1953. Secondly, the United Front composed of the Awami League, Krishak Sramik Party and



Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

Nezam-e-Islam incorporated in their 1954 election manifesto the demand for building a bridge on Jamuna. The chief architects of the United Front were Maulana Bhashani as President of the Awami League and Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Haq, founder of the Krishak Sramik Party. Thirdly, one Saifur Rahman, a member of the East Pakistan Legislative Assembly, raised the issue in the House on the 6th January 1964 and had to be assuaged by the then Communication Minister Nawab Hasan Askari. Finally, the Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan unanimously adopted a resolution on the 11th July 1966 in favour of construction of the bridge. A feasibility study also started the same year, but nothing tangible really happened.

The matter had been initiated so long ago that it may take time to collate more detailed information and to examine records. However, many are well aware that the issue of foreign collaboration of this project was mooted first with China during the Pakistan time. Pakistan then found in China a staunch and reliable friend, who was willing and able to help Pakistan in all possible ways in various fields. Though China lacked highly advanced technology, her wide experience of building bridges, dams and taming of turbulent rivers raised hope that China would perhaps be able to help make construction of a bridge on river Jamuna. Some of us would recall the doyen of Bangladeshi diplomats, the late Khwaja M. Kaiser, saying that he had spent hours with Chinese officials and experts hovering over the map of the Brahmaputra basin, exploring the possibility of building a bridge across the Jamuna. Khwaja Kaiser was then Pakistan's last Ambassador to China before Bangladesh was born. But the matter did not progress much due to lack of interest by the Islamabadi regime at that time.

Following creation of Bangladesh, China had no diplomatic relations with Bangladesh until she recognised our country four years later. That is why it was prudent on the part of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to raise this issue during his visit to Japan, the richest nation of the East, in 1973 and to solicit her support for construction of the bridge. Accordingly, the JICA or the Japanese International Co-operation Agency sent a team to Bangladesh for

preparing a feasibility study on this project. But for some reason or other, the matter was not seriously pursued thereafter.

During the martial law that followed the period of Sheikh Mujib one witnessed little action in this regard. Even the efforts of the late President Ziaur Rahman on this issue were limited. It was President Ershad who took concrete steps by way of establishing a much needed organisation, the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge Authority or the JMBAA as it is known in ordinary parlance, for this purpose. He also did a commendable job of putting a levy and a surcharge in order to provide the prestigious and much needed internal resource component for the financing of the project. The amount collected till a part of Begum Zia's time was a respectable sum of Taka 506 crores.

The bulk of the work, however, was carried out during the regime of Begum Khaleda Zia. The project was incorporated in the 5th Five Year Plan with a ratified financial allocation. The Project Proposal was for the first time approved by the ECNEC. Serious negotiations were carried out with the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and Japan with high level visits which included the visit of the World Bank President

Louis Preston to Dhaka. The feasibility report was finally approved by all the three and an agreement for providing aid to the tune of \$200 million was concluded with each of them for construction of the bridge in early 1994. The agreement with Japan was signed during the official visit to that country of Begum Zia as Prime Minister. Tenders were floated and contracts were awarded. The construction work was undertaken in full earnest following the laying of the foundation stone by Begum Zia on the 10th April 1994. Over 60 per cent of the work was completed when Begum Zia relinquished charge as Prime Minister in 1996.

Sheikh Hasina's contribution to the bridge mostly consisted in exercising responsibility for supervision of the remaining work, which was done in a general fashion by the designated authority and various organisations. Her special pre-occupation in this regard, however, lay principally in changing the name of the bridge to be Bangabandhu Bridge. It is, nevertheless, the prerogative of the Head of Government which she, in fact, is. But the two other Heads of Government who preceded her also had the same prerogative during their respective tenure. But they did not change the name of the bridge in favour of anyone of their choice. They preferred to retain the original and natural nomenclature of the Jamuna bridge by which it had been known for decades. Besides, during the inauguration ceremony, no acknowledgment was made of these Heads of Government whose contributions to the making of the bridge were by far much more than the present Prime Minister herself. She would have done a gracious job, had her pioneers' names been mentioned, even cursorily. She did not. Some made a general but not too unobtrusive an observation on the various stages of construction, commenting that while Ershad had initiated, action and Khaleda did most of the work, Hasina reaped the harvest.

Finally, a question naturally comes to one's mind as to how could Bangabandhu first dream of a project, which had been already contemplated, mooted and even publicly demanded by others many years ago. Such an act of over enthusiasm by way of suddenly attributing something to someone only reveals the eternal conflict between the fact and the fiction and is most unfortunate. If the purpose was to further glorify an already glorified person, the initiators of this action are sadly mistaken.

To the Editor...

BJ Bridge: Shuttle bus service

Sir, BPC may start or arrange a shuttle tourist bus service across the bridge plying several times a day with a dozen buses to satisfy initial public enthusiasm for a few months. Snack parks may be opened on both sides for rest and refreshment. It should have been planned from day one.

Aerial photo of the bridge, and mini model will be hot sellers. Lakhs should have been released on the opening day. There is a difference between political propaganda and planned public service.

A Senior Citizen Dhaka

Hide and seek

Sir, It is indeed laudable to have written in your editorial recently as "The BCL also has its armed cadres, as criminally prone as the goons in the opposite challenges." Thank you for this clear-cut statement. Just few days back our Prime Minister said, while speaking in the House, that the Awami League, as per its organisational structure, does not have any student-front. What was the PM trying to imply by this? Did the PM want to mean that the Awami League is not involving students in politics? If so, then who are the persons in the BCL? Our PM always likes to say that "terrorists do not have any (political) grouping". We will not have a solution to terrorism as long as it is said like that. Someone has to start by admitting one's fault with all-out sincerity and begin the process of getting rid of terrorism.

An Anxious Observer Chittagong.

Encourage local assembly

Sir, Now that the import duty and tax on air conditioners have been raised, local assembly of this item, and of air-coolers and water-coolers may be encouraged, as in a neighbouring country. The technology is not high-tech, nor the process complex. Air-coolers are much cheaper and easier to maintain, and the water coolers avoid the use of ice, which is not

always manufactured under safe and hygienic conditions. Water coolers in the offices, hospitals & restaurants can also use replaceable filters. The latter can also be imported in CKD form, and later, manufactured.

Bangladesh has a hot and humid climate, and this type of industry has to be encouraged, to bring it down from the users in the "luxury" category (as in the case of computers and motorized cycles). Keep the people cool and mobile.

The governance will be popular if the middle class could be satisfied, as such Bangladeshes are generally educated and have sharp critical faculties, and they are the country's greatest asset. Keep a hold on the Bangalee tongue, and smiles will flow all around.

A Zabr Dhaka

Residential public telephones

Sir, The office may not pay the monthly telephone bills for residential telephones, once these are installed officially for the stipulated period at the residences of public servants; but a fixed "telephone allowance" may be added to the monthly salary based on average calculation for different levels of officials (limited perk). This will discourage long-distance calls (do it from office, and maintain Log at both places).

The public telephones are being misused and the arrears bills are piling up, as per figures released publicly. There are practical ways of controlling recurring expenditure. Similarly the misuse of government vehicles may be controlled. The bureaucracy can find solutions to each and every problem, once the will is there!

Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

"Parks in Peril"

Sir, I appreciate your editorial dated 15th June '98, on the captioned subject. The interested quarter are trying to grab the vacant land in the city — be it a park for disabled persons or children. There was a children's park at Kalabagan near Mirpur Road. The name-plate the park has no more there. The park has

turned into a cricket academy. Another part of the park has turned into a nursery. Definitely the town planners were sincere to keep a provision of children's park for facilitating the city dwellers of the area to allow their children to play in the parks.

Children don't find any space play in the lanes and by-lanes. Very often we talk about the health and mental frame of the children. How the mental frame and health of the children will grow if we don't allow them a place to inhale fresh air!

Mahbubul Haque Chowdhury General Manager, Agrani Bank, Rajshahi

"Eye for an eye..."

Sir, I read with interest the article "The policy of an Eye for an Eye would leave Everyone Blind" by Anam A Choudhury. I feel Daily Star readers deserve more of these well-written critical commentaries.

One of the points the writer took up about non-existent social, economic or financial policies requires thoughtful consideration. This "lack of policy" or in other words "vision" has been the mainstay of not only the Awami League but all the ruling cliques before it. I strongly feel it is necessary the media should challenge the government to establish concrete policies. Politics of rhetorics have to stop. It is an understatement to say the readers, the public demand to know how the government plans to confront the corruption, the deceit, the homelessness, the power shortages, the rapes, the murders, the misery, the poverty, the educational breakdown.

The Administration has very little time to come up with well-thought ideas but the media has to insure it does. And the best way to do this would be to:

- 1) Print articles by courageous and motivated writers who have new ideas to introduce rather than the usual drab that we are accustomed to.
- 2) Stop printing the nonsense that our leaders' spurt out day in and day out.

We are witnessing a meltdown of this country — the time to act is now.

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