

An Auspicious Tie-up

It was both common sense and convenience neglected for an awfully long time. Having people at the rural and grassroots level run to two different places for health care and family planning services was doing good neither to government's plan for spreading the message of population control nor to the cause of health care itself. It is heart-warming that authorities have finally decided to put this disjointed and hamstrung reality behind. We commend government's decision to unify the health and family planning centres at thana and union levels.

Although our performance in child immunisation is highly satisfactory even by international standards we are yet to make much headway in reproductive health and health care in general. Rural women are still the most vulnerable group in a situation where the mothers have little or no access to reasonably efficient medical service and advice before and after bearing a child. Statistics from a World Bank study incorporated in the yesterday's Star report say it all. The situation is particularly galling because we have a distinct infrastructural edge over many other developing nations: the number of thana health complexes that we have had in the last few years is quite remarkable. Yet we have failed to deliver the goods. One reason was monstrosity-like consisting in the disjointed nature of things, which now looks poised for removal sooner than later. And then there was the perennial and universal unwillingness among our doctors to work away from the cities. Hopefully, the unification of family planning and curative and preventive health care services will hold enough incentive for them to go to the villages. In any case it has to be ensured that doctors spread across the rural Bangladesh.

Perhaps it would be just as relevant to recall here what we had suggested in this column not long ago: since unification is the theme why not go for an integrated nursing and paramedic training scheme? If they are groomed say, to the efficiency level of LMF doctors, they will not only add to the strength of the health care service numerically but will also help reduce the critical dependence on the MBBS doctors. Of late it has been a virtual swim in a flow of goody tidings. We do not want any of these to be looked back as damp promises that never took off. Just do as you have decided.

Road Deaths and Police

No nation can be as oblivious to the way it dies — as Bangladesh. Arsenic pollution of ground water, which supplies the whole of the drinking water need of the nation, could be cited as a proof. But nothing perhaps can beat the road toll of lives. Ten thousand killed in ten years and 26 thousand maimed. The successive governments, including the present one, are not known to have mooted the problem with any degree of seriousness and it has been allowed to snowball into the demon it is now. So thanks to the Gano-Shakkhorata Abhijan and the Local Government Engineering Department which took up the problem for a seminar on Wednesday. A discussant observed that road accidents accounted for an annual loss to the tune of 2 per cent of GDP or about Tk 300 crore. This is a deceptive figure hiding in it the loss of one thousand lives and wounding of 2600 citizens — amounting to immeasurable damage to the nation.

Many worthy suggestions were made at the seminar. If only government could respond to these sincerely and ably our road and traffic situation could look up substantially. For an overall and steady improvement in the security of the roads it is, however, imperative that the policing aspect of it be rid of corruption and inefficiency. Thanks to police deficiencies up to 80 per cent of the licensed drivers of motorised vehicles are not equipped with required knowledge of their machines or of the traffic laws. In any civilised country all of these would flunk the driving tests.

Thanks again to the authorities for the fact that of the vehicles on the road up to 80 per cent are road-worthy. Without doing anything effectively to change this, all expert talk on curbing road accidents will be fruitless.

Road traffic of the nation has been galloping to inconceivable volumes with the passage of every post-independence decade. Traffic police haven't grown in number and strength keeping pace with the demand of the developing situation. Doubling the present strength could perhaps do. But no, not without removing the in-built cancer of corruption.

Participants have wisely talked of transport syndicates gone completely out of state control. But they have failed to as much as hint at the wayward policemen's stakes in these syndicates.

EPZ Profile

Country's Export Processing Zones took a tumble in investment by 11 per cent during the last fiscal as compared with the level recorded the year before. Employment generation dropped only marginally by one per cent as a somewhat redeeming feature but which could be eroded if the trend goes on. The cumulative investment figure — till June 1998 — stood at US\$ 299 million and the DEPZ 78 million dollars.

The drop in investment, according to the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority, is attributable to the currency turmoil in the East and South East Asian countries. The last two months in particular drew a complete blank for Bangladesh as it did for the most other South Asian economies.

We would like to respond to this scenario in three ways. Our foreign investors in the EPZs have been mostly from the Asian countries. We suggest that a vigorous salesmanship drive be made in other continents to attract new investors. Secondly, we ask, has the government taken up any specific plan to ensure that the sun-set industries of some East and South East Asian countries are re-located in Bangladesh in a reasonable number? Finally, the industries in the EPZs being heavily dependent on imports from abroad reminds of a concurrent need to have a number of export-oriented agro-based units there. Nothing like using local raw materials wherever possible for the sake of preserving the net value of exports by a cut-back on import bill.

Here Comes the Terminator!

Seeds are in the hands of seed-companies, fertility is the responsibility of chemical factories and pest management, of the pesticide lobby. In the process traditional varieties and associated species with their unique genetic traits are smothered.

heads of wheat will essentially be seed morgues. No longer will the natural cycle of plant to seed to plant to seed cycle be permitted. The technology is so flawless in its applicability that its corporate owners will have complete biological control over the food crops in which it is applied.

Since I have written all about it, earlier, why repeat the dismal scenario? Because, I got worried when we received an e-mail from Anne Marie of Bio-diversity Action Network. She has sent us a press release of 25 June, 1998. The title reads, "Green and Monsanto join hands to provide environmentally-friendly technologies to the poor in Bangladesh. Announcing the creation of a Grameen-Monsanto Centre, Robert Shapiro, the chairman and CEO of Monsanto said, "The Centre will provide the opportunity to demonstrate how sustainable technologies, combined with micro-credit, can transform people's lives, allowing them to improve the quality of life and environment."

Monsanto will provide initial funding and its vast repertoire of technologies including those for transgenic crops. For example, an initial demonstration farm will conduct trials on maize, rice and cotton in an effort to make Bangladesh self-sufficient in these crucial crops. Utilising microcredit loans and financing for external inputs, these technologies will then be available to local farmers through the Centre. And the state-of-the-art technologies will not be limited to seed but extend all across the food chain.

Clearly, this will mean a breakthrough in seed-technology and availability of good seed for the small farmers and poor peasants. So, one should be happy rather than worried. But, there is an unfortunate catch. If I may refer to my earlier column on Terminator Technology, the readers will recall that on 11 May, 1998, a

mere nine weeks after the announcement of the technology, Monsanto, the multinational seed and pesticide giant, had bought the Delta and Pine Land Company and along with it complete control over the Terminator Technology.

For a larger perspective of the implication of this acquisition, I shall paraphrase from a summary of some published information on Monsanto's current agricultural holdings and activities. The summary has been collated by Geri Guidetti of the Ark Institute, and much of what follows is almost verbatim.



Do I Dare!
A Z M Obaidullah Khan

With the purchase of Delta and Pine Land Company, Monsanto has now an overwhelming 85 per cent share of the U.S. Corn seed-market. Simultaneously Monsanto has announced the take over of the second largest maize company in the US, namely, Dekalb. Only a year before, in January 1997, Monsanto acquired Holden's Foundation Seeds. The goal at the time, as its spokesperson said, was to get its bio-engineered seed on at least half of the then 40 million acres that Monsanto had access to via its acquisitions. It is estimated that 25-35 per cent of US corn acreage is planted with Holden's products. The Delta and Pine Land Company, Dekalb and Holden acquisitions make Monsanto now the dominant player in the global corn or maize market.

In November, 1997, Monsanto took over the Brazilian seed company, namely Sementes Agroce, thus controlling 30 per cent of the Brazilian corn seed market. According to some concerned scientists, Brazilian farmers who have

been breeding and saving seed for centuries are considered prime-targets for terminator seed products.

Again late last year, "Monsanto and Millennium Pharmaceuticals, another US-based genomics company, announced a 5-year collaborative agreement worth over \$118 million including the creation of a new Monsanto subsidiary with about 100 scientists to work exclusively with Millennium to use genetic technologies. The exclusive agreement is not limited to a single crop or geographic location. It covers all crop plants in all countries. Monsanto considers the new subsidiary an integral part of its life science strategy and hopes to gain a competitive edge in the search for patentable and likely "Terminator-able" crop genes."

Further, as Geri Guidetti notes, Monsanto has pioneered enforcement strategies for protection of its plant patents. Much of the pioneering has been around its genetically altered soy-beans which have the ability to withstand spraying with the company's leading herbicide called Roundup. All other weeds and native plants are destroyed except the beans.

In 1996, the company required farmers buying its "Roundup Ready Soy-beans" to sign and adhere to its "Roundup Ready Gene-agreement" terms. The terms were as follows: The farmer must pay a \$5 per bag fee. The farmer must give Monsanto the right to inspect, monitor and test his/her fields for up to three years. The farmer must use only Monsanto's brand of the glyphosate herbicide called Roundup. The farmer must give up his/her

right to save and replant the patented seed. The farmer must agree not to sell or otherwise supply the seed to 'any other person or entity'. The farmer must also pay Monsanto '100 times the then applicable fee for the Roundup Ready genes times the number of units of transferred seed plus reasonable attorney's fees and expenses', should he violate any portion of the agreement.

One of the conditions namely that of inspecting the fields was modified in 1997 when the farmers protested against the monitoring of their private property. The company has used similar licensing agreement for its genetically engineered cotton. According to a spokeswoman, Monsanto plan to introduce licensing agreements with all the genetically engineered seeds that it brings to market. These will include Roundup Ready Canola (canola oil), corn, sugarbeets etc.

If the readers keep in mind that Monsanto has now the Terminator Technology to license which according to its primary inventor is applicable to all crops, they can clearly foresee the massive potential of Monsanto's Roundup Ready seed and licensing agreements and the Terminator Technology to increasing number of companies and food crops. And as I mentioned in my earlier column, its eventual incorporation into all genetically engineered and open-pollinated non-hybrid food crops is highly predictable.

In fact, although the scientific jury is still out, there is a risk of the terminator-function crops into which it has been intentionally incorporated and moving into surrounding open-pollinated crops or wild, related plants in fields nearby. The means of the infection would be via pollen from Terminator altered plants.

Hence my concern. Our small farmers depend almost entirely on non-hybrid, open-pollinated seeds that let them

retain the means of growing their own food; ensure protective bio-diversity, and provide personal food security in insecure times. Now the Terminator threatens even these and Monsanto owns the technology.

As I said earlier, if we are not vigilant, this disastrous technology will ensure absolute dependence of farmers and the people they feed on giant life science companies like Monsanto. Dependence does not foster freedom. It inhibits the flowering of people's creativity and their right to control their own life and destiny.

Allow me, in that context, to quote from Dr. M.S. Swaminathan: "Agricultural intensification and diversification are the only available options for safeguarding food security as well as for improving the security of the livelihoods of the poor. Genetic variability which serves as the feed-stock for the bio-technology industry is at the same time the most important safety net for farmers who must seek to minimise risks arising from pest epidemics. Conservation and sustainable utilisation of bio-diversity are essential for halting the deterioration between food and people. In the current atmosphere of promoting market-driven economics, it is obvious that a symbiotic balance must be found between private profit and public good."

Also, one may recall the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt: "Concentration of economic power in all-embracing corporations represents private enterprise become a kind of private government which is a power unto itself."

Leaving that word of caution voiced by Roosevelt aside, life form patenting is today a major global issue, as bio-technology corporations move toward the direct manipulation and commercialisation of not only plant genetic materials but also of human genetic materials. All of us nationally and internationally must be vigilant about these monopolistic moves and experiments and make sure that life forms and all other biological materials/processes are excluded from our patent systems.

To the Editor...

Bangladesh and NE India

Sir, Brig (Retd) Hafiz's column is worth reading for expert analysis, deep background knowledge and clear exposure. He annotated well (DS, July 13) "the political and ethnic problems of India's unstable north-eastern region."

India is desperately trying to woo Bangladesh to help her with transport, trade and transit facilities between this isolated region and the remaining part of the country. Even the British, during the period of the Raj were not very successful about the issue when East Bengal was a part of the Indian administration before partition. And now even with trade and transit facilities, the political problem will be difficult to

Why do we talk much and do little? Tackle the human side first, then the technical side. Zero in on the culprits first, before blaming the tools and resources.

solve because of the degree and kind of ethnic diversity. Now a mighty power is deeply interested in the region, with SOFA and border monitoring network under presumed planning (Myanmar is a western target, there is nothing secret about it). Delhi is weak, and the transitional period may remain instable. Islamabad is passing through a crisis with the Rupee plunging to 62 to the USD.

Bangladesh is in the centre of a potentially active region of international and regional activities. Every move must be made with national consensus, and not in hurry as happened when the new regime came into power in Dhaka and started acting enthusiastically and hurriedly to overseas overtures in the name of regional cohesion. We have no clout at regional and international levels, therefore it is all the more necessary not to be easily persuaded by powerful external groups.

An Observer
Dhaka

Naming after great names

Sir, This refers to Mr A R Chowdhury's letter in the DS dated 9th July '98.

Volumes have been written by famous columnists and writers on this which has recently reached an epidemic stage in Bangladesh. Naming a new thing after great personalities is in vogue in almost all the countries of the world. But Bangladesh has definitely acquired speciality in this respect. Here, this practice is exercised as:

- a) Giving a new name to a new thing, b) Adding a name to an already existing name (as if, adding a 'khetab' to a name) and c) Replacing existing names by a new name.

I hate to quote examples because there are so many that it will need a lot of space. Each name — famous, infamous or non-famous — has a history behind it and history cannot be changed by changing names. How many people call the then Jinnah Avenue, Bangabandhu Avenue even after the name was changed? I think, most of the general public still call it Jinnah Avenue whether they like Jinnah or not. In Jeddah, there is King Abdul Azz University, But Mekka where our great

Prophet (SM) was born is still Mekka and not Rosulpur or something like that. Likewise, Jamuna Bridge can be Bangladesh Jamuna Bridge. But Jamuna river will always be Jamuna river and not Bangladesh river. So, please let Tungipara and Gopalganj be happy with their original names.

Mahmood
House # 59, Road # 7
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

"Stop discriminating the smokers"

Sir, In the USA, the slant on the anti-smoking campaign has subtly shifted to discourage teenagers from smoking. In the developing countries such as Bangladesh the crude, blind and nonprofessional imitation of outdated propaganda is very much deplorable. And as a result the sane, respectable and adult, smokers at every level of society are under pressure of being ostracised. Many public places are being turned into no-smoking zones. Also in the private sector (restaurants, etc) it has become a fashion to introduce smoking and no-smoking areas (in my office my boss' room is a no-smoking one).

The overzealous official sensitivity displayed is disgusting and provoking. Carry on the no-smoking campaign, but in a decent manner.

A Smoker
Dhaka

Power disconnection campaign

Sir, What happened to the "ruthless" campaign of disconnection of illegal and unauthorised electricity connections? After the initial publicity, the whole operation appears to be nipped in the bud by vested interests. The data from the limited campaign is not being publicised.

The campaign may be conducted nationwide for a fortnight and then reviewed for the second campaign. The extra MW of stolen power recovered may be announced. It may be around 100 MW countrywide. This is not a routine operation, hence routine operation and monitoring will not do.

Something is seriously wrong with the civil service — the efficiency at the routine level is also very low during critical "campaigns". Irregularities and pilferage should be dealt with in a determined manner in all the sectors. The defaulters must be punished: the providers and the users, and those involved in between during the processing. Oratory and condemnation and 'urgings' will not produce the required results.

Why do we talk much and do little? Tackle the human side first, then the technical side. Zero in on the culprits first, before blaming the tools and resources.

We have hearts overflowing with the milk of human kindness! Remove the feeding bottles!
AZ
Dhaka

Promotion to GM

Sir, The Selection Committee constituted by the Ministry of Finance under the Chairmanship of Governor Bangladesh Bank for making a

panel of DGM of various NCBs and DFIs to be promoted to the post of GM as and when vacancy occurs. Regarding the matter a panel of 30 (thirty) candidates was prepared. This panel is going to be exhausted soon. Accordingly, preparation of new panel is required. Keeping this idea in mind CVs of DGMs of various NCBs and DFIs has already been asked for by the Ministry of Finance.

There is a rumour that some quarters is trying with the connivance of some officers of Ministry of Finance not to hold fresh interview rather the list of candidates made in the last interview should be extended up to serial 40. This is unfair. The panel when exhausted has no scope to reopen and extend beyond the list made. This practice was never exercised during the last 50 years.

DGMs who could not come out successful in the last interview may qualify in the next interview. But if the chance for interview is blocked by the new invention of the corrupted officers the loss of the prospective candidates would be irreparable.

M Shamsul Haq
67, Mughla Para
Dhaka-1000

SOFA

Sir, The much talked about SOFA will enable the US armed forces to move into Bangladesh without any visa. The US armed forces will then be able to penetrate into Bangladesh territory easily for relief service in case of emergency. Bangladeshi people are habituated to meet the eventualities of natural disaster. Natural calamity visits this part of the world very frequently and the people of Bangladesh seek help from different countries.

I do not think it is wise easy to allow any foreign troops to stay in our country as an advance party to help us. Government should think very seriously to allow, in penetrating any foreign forces in the sovereign soil of Bangladesh. *Mahbulul Haque Chowdhury*
153, Lake Circus, Kalabagan
Dhaka

Canning industry ignored

Sir, About two years ago I purchased a locally canned tin of sliced pineapples — out of curiosity. Soon the product disappeared from the shops. The price was too high: four times the cost of a single piece of uncut (unprocessed) pineapple available in the wet bazaar. Absence of mass production facilities under a national network.

Recent news item: a particular variety of CHT pineapples has drawn an initial order from London for 500 tons per annum. Our export of fresh vegetables to the Middle East market is growing steadily, but at small business level.

Consider another aspect of the same problem: the local consumers cannot buy off-season fruits and vegetables, although the production can match the demand. In fact surplus stocks rot and perish in many interior rural areas of Bangladesh as the minimum infrastructure is simply not there for collection, storage, preservation, transportation and marketing (cooperative network backed by technical facilities). One of the missing facilities is the non-develop-

ment of the canning industry on a priority basis.

At last there is some good news. The World Bank is willing to fund a survey to plan a rural-based system for foodstuff for a 27-year period (1998-2025) to take care of the shortcomings mentioned above.

The traditional fish industry is yet to be modernized ignoring the emphasis on the exporters; and the recent ban on fishmongers against institutionalised toll collection. Perishable edible products face similar marketing negligence. In fact, these services are run by small business units scattered all over the country, suffering from the neglect of negligence the facilitators willing to pump life and funding into the sector. This will not come up without a state-approved master plan. Where is it?

Fortunately or unfortunately, only some specific 'export' items get the state patronage and backing, forgetting the modern business potentiality of the vast internal market of over 100 million consumers for hundreds of kinds of products. Such a vast market a 'big business'.

Our governance still continues to be in the 'political' phase, and yet to be fully business-oriented. This will happen only when the private sector starts developing rapidly in a healthy manner. There is no shortage of investment in the business world; it all depends on the attractive power of the working climate. Bangladesh's investment climate looks very bright on paper, and it is indeed so, it could not be better. We are still weak in bridging the gap between plan and practice. The world of 'practice' is a big world of jigsaw puzzles yet to be assembled into a recognizable, respectable and acceptable pattern.

It is the style of governance — the bureaucracy holding the centre stage, decade after decade, aged along by political instability. The vicious circles can only be broken with sufficient 'take-off' speed and strength. This cannot happen unless the political parties trust one another and learn to work (offer their services) in a routine manner.

For decades we have been living in different ad hoc or transient phases of development towards ideal governance. Once the spotlight shifts from the business of politics, the country will take off, automatically easing the basic problems which bedevil the developers.

A Husnain
Dhaka

The charmers

Sir, "Koto Je tomakey beshchekh bhalo, shey kotha tumi jodi jantey...", the opening lines of a melodious song which cut away my romantic heart, plunging it into a deep contemplation... unforgettable, is one of my favourites. And the singer? Yes, Shubir Nandi, the music charmer of Bangladesh is revered by me as the best who is now in BIRDEM suffering from "old age complications" as reported in the DS daily of 4 July.

The news said that the Information Minister visited Baren Mijumder and Shubir Nandi at BIRDEM. It was so generous of the minister to pay visit and ask their welfare.

The fact is, that the term "old age complications" in case of Shubir Nandi can barely be accepted. When Manna Dey is still

touring around and performing on stage at the age of 80, how can I just accept that Shubir Nandi is an ailing patient of "old age complications"? It is a heart-breaking news indeed.

In this cruel world, we seldom evaluate the potency in a person during his/her lifetime. It cannot be denied that our cultural arena has been enriched by the contribution of many artists, many of whom at their times of distress have just withered away unnoticed amidst sheer negligence of authorities concerned.

The news of Baren Mijumder's ailment has been appearing in the newspapers for the last few days and some cultural organisations have appealed to the government for arranging his treatment abroad. But regrettably, no such step has yet been taken.

I would earnestly request the authorities concerned to do something for these valuable artists. They need good treatment, appropriate care and sincere attention. They are so precious... do not just let them waste away.

Neelima Islam
House: 49, Road: 2
Flat-D, 1st Floor
Mohammadia Housing Society
Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207.

Sir, What a scene! What a pathetic scene, the photograph in your esteemed daily dated July 13, 1998 on page 12 reveals the picture of Bangladesh — the helpless father, the futureless children. It's all due to prevailing law and order situation in the country.

Where should we go? Whom to ask for justice? What is democracy, anyway?

A K M Nurul Absar
Divisional Engineer
Trunks (Inland)
Ramna, Dhaka.

The plight of the cycle rickshaw industry

Sir, The cycle rickshaw is one of the biggest industries in Bangladesh, with estimated half a million vehicles in use, and around two million persons employed in the industry — manufacture of components, assembly, operation and servicing. The data should be available with the authorities, but these are hardly being publicised, for public information in regard to planning, investment, regulation, monitoring, BMR and reviews. There is spotlight only on the inconveniences, traffic jams, and unauthorised vehicles and drivers.

But officially it appears to be treated as a non-formal sector, and there is hardly any formal investment in the industry. The industry is allowed to expand in a non-planned way, in the absence of professionals and big business companies who are not attracted to this sector, as seen in the other sectors. There are no engineers and professional designers and managers. Better rickshaws are not being designed, and there is no sign of feasibility study of introducing mass-production methods using authorised capital.

How long this step-motherly treatment will continue? It is time to focus official spotlight on the sector for a coordinated approach in running the indus-

try in a professional manner. It is too big an industry for 'jinjira' type of business!

Cycle pedal rickshaws may continue to operate for many years in the small towns and the fringe areas between towns and villages; as our human resource is very rich, and no intensive formal training, course or literacy is needed to drive a rickshaw, thereby attracting the economically backward job seekers, even with hardly any literacy. In almost every district, there are labour unions and associations to look after the welfare of this industry, providing a vital public service in the road transport sector, particularly to the middle and lower-income groups. So long poverty is not eradicated, the humble cycle rickshaw will dominate the streets.

Is it classified as an 'industry' as in the case of other sectors, to be eligible for fiscal and other business benefits? Such news items hardly appear in the mass media. The ADP, FFYP, and the planners never mention this thriving 'industry', although the combined indigenous investment is high.

It may be better for this industry to be shifted from the 'cottage industry' category, to derive the benefits of modern business facilities. There is no harm in asking for a better rickshaw, providing service at professional standard.

A Husnain
Dhaka.

To BUET authorities

Sir, At BUET, Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics departments are offering post-graduate courses (M Phil, and Ph.D) for a long time. But it is a matter of regret that though all felicitations are available in these departments, undergraduate course (honours) have not yet been started. In these departments many scholar teachers are engaged in teaching and research activities, and most of them are foreign Ph.D degree holders like other disciplines.

If honours courses are opened in these departments our honourable scholar teachers would get meritorious students for research works and in that case the contribution of BUET in science and technology will surely be increased and improved.

Moreover, it is now proved that without basic research in science, no technology can exist. It may be mentioned that most renowned technological institutions of the world such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), USA and Tokyo Institute of Technology (TITech), Japan, have all the subjects of science, technology and engineering.

Since an excellent academic atmosphere is maintained at BUET for teaching and research activities more students may get a chance to study here. Every year BUET authorities may easily take more 120 students in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics departments. Since all facilities like adequate teachers, classrooms, libraries and laboratories are present in these departments, I appeal to the BUET authorities to please open honours course in these departments.

Asif Karim
BUET, Dhaka