

Potential Revenue

Government statistics on revenue leakages and the narrow tax base of the country portray the huge gap between what reaches the state coffers and how much more replenished it would be if the full potential were exploited. In keeping with its market liberalisation policies, the World Bank has quite predictably praised the reduction of tariff structure in the national budget for fiscal 1998-99 but taken a crucial view of the systemic revenue losses. Such leakages are of 'crucial importance' especially in view of the 'extremely narrow' tax base the country is having to make do with. There cannot be any second opinion on this.

The WB's *Economic Update* of July 1998 quotes official statistics as an eye-opener to the high degree of income tax and corporate tax dodging in the country. Among a million tax-payers only 731 individuals and 312 companies account for 56 per cent of the collected revenues under those two heads. An overwhelming number of taxable persons and companies are either keeping entirely out of the dragnet or paying nominal amounts to get past their legal liabilities.

How are they doing all this? The customary explanation centres around a nexus between tax officials and potential payers. We are not saying this is basically a wrong suspicion but it is necessary to remind ourselves the fact that tax evasion is not a problem peculiar to Bangladesh, rather it is prevalent in varying degrees in the advanced world, let alone other South Asian countries. They are trying all the time to outwit potential tax dodgers. Unpaid taxes are regarded as some saving made by many an industrialist and businessman. And with possible legal actions neutralised by cuts to tax officials where could the harm be? Given our accounting practices and tax assessment procedures, tax evasions cannot be easily ruled out. We have to take a leaf or two from the tax administration handbooks of other countries who have mastered the art and science of maximum revenue collection despite the human pitfalls. In other words, we need to plug the holes in the system and make it thoroughly accountable. The degree of discretion we allow to the tax officials should basically depend on the levels of his motivation and training.

There is no conflict of priorities between improvement of revenue collection and expansion of the tax base. First we consolidate and prove our efficiency, and then we advance.

Towards Kitchen Fishery

The high price has made fish a luxury and a rare item on an average citizen's plate. The prohibitive price stems from an ever-shrinking supply and a population growing inexorably. There has been a drastic reduction over the past decades in the volume and area of Bangladesh's water-bodies. The resulting decrease in fish yield was confronted by large-scale plundering of fries. And this continues, causing a progressively diminishing output of fish and pushing the thing to a disastrous level. The current production of 25 lakh ton falls short of the national need by 10 to 15 lakh tons.

The yearly fish festival, inaugurated yesterday by the Prime Minister, is an interesting event — very exciting for the fish eaters of the city. There is, however, a difference between it and the other good event — the Tree Festival. At the latter, people come and collect seeds and saplings, not to consume them but to sow and plant them. But at the fish festival they will be there to buy the fish and, repairing back home, eat them up. We do not know if they sell fish eggs and fries for culture. Even if they do, the fisherman or fish farmer is very unlikely to collect his need from the Fish Festival.

A way can be suggested to minimise this difference. Why doesn't the festival promote the idea of the kitchen fishery? Exactly as the kitchen gardens. Fish cannot be bred in pots, all right — but flower pots take quite a space. This space on the roof and verandah and the ground close to the flat can be used for tanks to cultivate fish — the suitability of the species is a matter to be counselled by the Fish Festival people.

An one-acre pond is not an acre-spread of water. It's a cube, five-times the land if five yards deep. Many-layered fish farming can do miracle if only egg-to-fry ratio could be improved through supervision and nutrition. It is in pisciculture that Bangladesh could have overtaken the agriculture performance. The performance of our fishery sector is bad, bad, bad.

Fishes are good lucrative business. Fish farming is a toddler now. With government support it should mature in no time.

T&T Owes an Answer

It is a clamour of collective protest against the discrimination and irregularity by the T&T authorities from bona fide T&T subscribers in areas like Azimpur, Malibagh and Wari that has come to be heard of late with increasing intensity and frequency. T&T assured its clients way back in 1995 that it would not cost them anything in the form of conversion fee to turn digital from the old analogue system. But what happened in reality was very far from what the authorities had assured earlier. The transfer was done patchily and preferentially. For instance, Dhanmondi was brought under digital connection but Azimpur and Elephant Road was not, at least not free of cost, though both the areas belong to the same Nilkhet Exchange. Similar partiality was reported from other areas like Malibagh and Wari.

The pattern is same everywhere. Areas where people enjoy clout with authorities or those who have access to the corridors of power are getting preference over the 'ordinary ones' — that are not hallowed by the residence of 'well connected people'. How long the tax-paying citizens will put up with this kind of rabid T&T corruption? Specially at a time when privatisation as an idea to get rid of inveterate corrupt ways of the public sector is gaining ground. It is veritable tome of words that Telecommunications Minister Md Nasim has spent on efficiency and crusade against corruption. We would urge him now to take a personal initiative to rectify this discriminatory attitude immediately.

ONCE upon a time, there were the Zamindars and the tenants. The landlords, absentee as most of them were, received rental income from the land and the tillers of the soil toiled and sweated. Today the old rentier class in our society has been replaced by a new breed of rent receivers, the educated one, the privileged bureaucracy, the pioneers of giant corporations, the policy makers.

In countries where the overwhelming majority are illiterate or dropouts from the primary school, the elite enjoy a high scarcity value of their education and profession. They have cleverly maneuvered educational investment away from the masses of little people and been able to protect their scarcity value.

Further, through license giving powers at various levels of bureaucracy, some of them have increased their capacity to increase the rental income. The innovative rhetoric of making education more relevant to the functional needs of the unfortunate toilers, while safeguarding the school-leaving certificate which prepares their privileged children for college on to jobs and professions has become a clever exclusionary device to block the access of the majority poor to professional qualifications, credentials and privileges.

What is the situation in Bangladesh? I paraphrase from a soon-to-be published report, entitled *Bangladesh 2020*. As a result of past neglect, and continuing waste of public resources at elementary, secondary and tertiary levels, Bangladesh has an adult literacy rate of 47 per cent compared to 88 per cent in Sri Lanka. Female literacy is at 22 per cent compared to 34 per cent in India and 83 per cent in Sri Lanka. Drop out and repetition rates are uncomfortably high. Fifty-seven per cent of the students who enter primary school do not complete five years of primary education (Ed Bos, 1995). Those who complete only achieve a second grade level of attainment. For many it takes 12 years to complete the 5-year cycle. Again, just around 3 per cent of the 11-15 year age group -200,000 students graduated from secondary schools in Bangladesh. They are too few for a country of 125 million people to provide skilled human resources for Bangladesh to go ahead.

As for higher education, campuses are mini-cantonnements with armed youth wings of the political parties confronting each other and disrupting academic sessions and activities. Those supposed to

pass out in five years are fortunate if they can complete their courses in double the time required. No problem for the fortunate few like my children or those of my cohorts. They go abroad and come back to inherit the rent receiving legacy that their parents have so zealously guarded for them.

Besides, "Secondary and higher school credentials have little currency in the labour market because they are regarded as purely academic programmes which graduate students highly trained in liberal arts and social sciences but far from able to master science and technical subjects... With regretfully good reason, many Bangladeshi employers in industry and commerce hold public vocational and training institutions and their graduates in minimum high regard. Since private sector entrepreneurs are not involved in the management of these institutions it is not surprising that graduates are not only poorly trained but untrained, in large measure, in skill areas relevant to the current or future needs of the country."

Allow me to recall what Dr. Amartya Sen said regarding the role of public support especially in a poor country in ensuring access to education and health services. The public support has two dimensions, first, in the sense of state entitlements of different sections of population and second, in the sense of people's own ability to secure a response from those in authority. There is an overwhelming evidence that investing in people is one of the major keys to reducing poverty and achieving growth with equity.

Jamison D.T. and Lawrence Law (1982) have clearly shown that each additional year of schooling brought a 16 per cent increase in the wages of Malaysian men and an 18 per cent increase in the wages of Malaysian women as well as a 5 per cent increase in the farm output. Corresponding numbers for Thailand are, 17 per cent, 13 per cent and 3 per cent.

Unfortunately in our country, the poor majority generally lack access to basic education, not to speak of secondary and tertiary levels. There is too little investment in human capital making almost inevitable that their children will continue to remain in unbelievable misery. But the question is not merely raising outlays in education, but the quantity of such

Education for All

In countries where the overwhelming majority are illiterate or dropouts from the primary school, the elite enjoy a high scarcity value of their education and profession. They have cleverly maneuvered educational investment away from the masses of little people and thus, been able to protect their scarcity value.

investment needs to be ensured.

A group of East Asian countries succeeded in recent past to quadruple per capita income and reduce poverty by improving health and education. The emphasis has been on the primary of universal primary education as well as reducing gender gaps at that and successively higher levels.

A World Bank study of 1993 shows that expanded access to basic education, much ahead of physical investment, has been the key to the rapid East Asian growth in the last three decades: in Taiwan for instance it accounted for 87 per cent of the overall growth. Further, "social rates of return indicate that the primary level has the highest return (18 per cent) compared to secondary education (14 per cent) and higher education (12 per cent).

The social returns are higher



A Z M Obaidullah Khan

still in female primary education, even without including the indirect benefits, linking female education to household hygiene, health and family planning.

Over the past few years, particularly recently, investment in primary education and girls' secondary education has increased. Between 1992 and 1995 the share of education in the ADP increased from 8 to 14 per cent. In fact, this year its share of current public expenditure has reached 20 per cent. Yet in the recent past (1994) the expenditures averaged around 2 per cent of the GDP, or what Korea spent on education in 1960 and well below the South Asian average of 3.3 per cent. The upward curve must be welcome, as also the primary given to basic education. In fact, to achieve the goal of education for all, the allocation has to go beyond 20 per cent of total budgetary expenditure and one half of that sum for primary education.

But merely raising outlays will not do. The tendency of a large portion of the added funds being spent for salary and subvention inputs to government and non-government schools persists. The challenge, in that context, is to ensure the efficiency of such investment for improving quality.

Some specific goals for bet-

ter learning achievements have been detailed out in the 2020 document. I have referred to earlier. For example, "a reduction in the primary grade repetition rate from the present 20 per cent to under 15 per cent and a rise in completion rate to 70 per cent. In secondary schools, where outlays should be maintained at 35 per cent of an expanding budget, the main emphasis should be on improving quality. An appropriate goal would be a rise in completion rates to 60 per cent by 2000 from current rates of barely 30 per cent. Schools should be encouraged to ensure that at least half their graduates succeed in passing the higher secondary certificate examination.... The costs associated with government expenditure on secondary education will need to be balanced by increased investment in quality as well as

and the disenfranchised. The Ministry of Education then can concentrate on policy parameters, standards, curriculum, testing and assessment. What should or should not take place in the class-rooms will be determined by parents, teachers and students in a participatory mode.

As for university education there has to be a movement both gradual and non-discriminatory toward financing it on a cost-recovery basis. The poor and the meritorious can be supported through scholarships, student loans or other such affirmative actions. The state government can mobilise resources from the families who can afford to pay. Liberal expansion of "private universities, colleges and technical training institutions would generate savings to be reinvested in primary and secondary level education."

Also, let me recall an oath that the students of newly-established Gono Viswavidyalaya took: "I shall meticulously attend classes, join seminars and field trips and as long as I am a student I shall not be involved in factional and partisan politics." Another one which both the students and the teachers took says that they would resist any gender discrimination and violence against women and be committed to a democratic social system that is based on equity, social justice and mutual tolerance.

I also recall the statement made by 96 year old Professor Serajul Huq at the University Alumni convention. He said, and I am paraphrasing, that in his times a good barber had seven razors of varying sharpness to perform their tasks well. How many teachers today have seven books on their bookshelves at home?

Finally, I thought I would mention briefly that progress today around the world is knowledge intensive. A particular thrust area, in that context, is the cutting edge of information science and technology. Higher seats of learning, beginning in the senior years of higher secondary level and upwards in the universities, must be equipped to turn out graduates in computer science and technology.

Software development is a potential growth and export industry. We must make sure that there is no dearth of qualified manpower to provide the outward looking software development for competitive advan-

land people of CHT. Has there arisen any reason to believe that, actually there is no peace in the country now and whatever is being told is all but a lie?

Once in 1971, we have seen such peace procession with huge placard, fastoon, and poster by the peace committee in front of Baitul Mokarram, trying to establish that there was no dearth of peace in the country. At that time, was it the real case?

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Overpopulated!

Sir, Bangladesh is more than demographically over-saturated. It is a society full of scophants. The flatterers are overcrowding the verandahs and back-doors of power and influence. The flies, even in the mango season, are finding it a bit too comfortable.

These flies are neutral, and loyal to the personalities in power. If their own machinery is well-oiled, they provide an invaluable service in oiling others, and those not conversant with lubricants there is nothing wrong in earning one's *dal-bhaat* (bread and butter), by providing special services. Only the special traffic codes have to be remembered, and followed discreetly. Keep the operation outside the limelight. Load-shedding and blackouts provide some cover.

Help your fellow men, advise the wise heads. Now help comes with a service charge (VAT in modern terminology; it means value added tax or fees). The cost of living is higher, inflation is creeping up, and the take-home pay is not adequate to keep up with the Joneses (all of us are not MPs, and the cars do not come tax-free).

AZ
Dhaka

Commercial wings abroad

Sir, Thanks for your editorial on this subject published on the 13th July, 1998. A letter titled "Economic Pool" was published in the DS on 22/12/97 stating merit of it. We should review our economic diplomacy by the persons who are involved and deal with the businessmen, trade, commerce industry etc. But we now led by wrong persons. A person of Admin cadre cannot do everything. But we are doing exactly so. This can be found from our trade wings abroad.

Therefore, our administration should be replaced by the economic diplomacy. We should change our square at in a round whole. We should remember that a person having first-class in every case cannot be a successful worker in particular case.

M Ali
Dhaka

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Free-style medical practice?

Sir, It is generally felt that medical specialists in the Dhaka city charge higher consultation fees than doctors of similar status in the neighbouring countries such as India and Pakistan.

It seems that the government has little to do in the matter of regulation of consultation fees by medical specialists. Such regulation did exist previously.

Lately, a new trend appears to have set in the matter of charging consultation fees. Whatever the fixed rates of such fees, it has been the common practice that a smaller amount is charged for subsequent visits to a doctor's chamber if they take place within a specific time limit.

Now this concession seems to have been withdrawn by some doctors. It is their practice at present to charge the same rate of fees even if such visits may take place within a day or two without any regard to any time-limit. Such free-style practice seems to hurt many patients with small means.

One affected Patient
Dhaka.

Dhaka city's parks

Sir, Generally, park is used to remove our fatigue, monotony and sadness spending some enchanting moments. Because of fulfilling these, there are a few parks (or uddyan) in Dhaka city (e.g. Ramna Park, Suhrawardy Uddyan, Osmany Uddyan etc). But it is a matter of great regret that these parks are not being used by the general people, whether it is rich, semi-rich or poor.

These parks and uddyan are occupied by some misled young boys and girls who are engaged in the illegal and rubbish activities. Besides, the inside beauty of these parks is not at all satisfactory by which we can spend some delightful moments. Whereas, if we are able to use these parks and uddyan properly — we can add a large number revenue every year with our GDP. The authorities have to take appropriate bold steps to modernise these parks and uddyan (by new plantation, flower gardening, arranging different kinds of games (especially for children) etc) and then ticketing system has to be introduced which will help not only to earn revenue but also to check on the undesired entrance of bad elements.

Shahidul Islam
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The crybabies

Sir, Hefty congratulations to Professor Manzur Alam for his brilliant article on 'trade deficit and smuggling with India' that was featured on 21/7/98 in the DS. His piece has addressed it right by labeling 'infant industries as permanent crybabies, obeying for even more protection' and 'lollipops'!

Indeed, Bangladesh should reform and rebuild a sound legal infrastructure and rule of law for open thriving competitive economy and this only can eradicate poverty. We must move away from governmental economic dictates and misallocations not advocate increase in governmental interference that do not work but for the few crybabies.

If there is no individual economic freedom, there is no freedom, neither true economic growth in any country. However, our society including the leading economists and the best of the intelligentsia tends to cling on to an authority that may or may not grant us economic liberty. Thus, the very sovereignty of the state is nothing but a state of the vested coterie of the crybabies and their dictatorial parents benefiting by denying the natural economic sovereignty of the individual Bangladeshis.

Nizam Ahmad.
MOER (making our economy right).
DHAKA.

World Population Day

Sir, Our government has observed the World Population Day '98 on the 12th of July. For this, different programmes were chalked out to observe the day. But I have a question relating the date of the day.

Why did Bangladesh observe this day on 12th July whereas over 100 countries of the world observed it on July 11, 1987? This question should also strike those who had watched the BBC World Service on 11th June, 1998.

Will anyone answer my question?

S M Enayetur Raheem
Applied Statistics
ISRT, DU

Ministry of Tribal Affairs

Why the new Ministry of CHT was not named the Ministry of Tribal Affairs? The latter covers CHT.

A Citizen
Dhaka

To BUET authorities

Sir, In BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics Department, the departments as full fledged departments like other disciplines. These departments have been offering post-graduate courses (MS and Ph.D degrees) for about two decades. But the undergraduate courses have not yet been introduced. Many scholar teachers are engaged in these departments for teaching and research activities. An adequate number of teachers, laboratories, classrooms and library facilities are available here. It may be mentioned that for the last five years, BUET conferred 10 (ten) Ph.D degrees and five of them were from the Physics Department.

Since all the facilities are available, the BUET authority can open Honours course in these departments. It is a very praiseworthy news that Dhaka University is going to open an Engineering Faculty — so if BUET authorities open undergraduate courses in science departments, it would surely be helpful for the meritorious students to study at BUET, a well reputed institution.

Dr. Antsur Rahman
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Necessity of 'land-lord organisation'

Sir, Thanks to Mr Abul Ashraf Noor for his letter printed on the 9th of July under the heading "Cruelty of house owners". I think it is a wise idea to form an organisation to protect the interests of the tenants. Side by side, I must add that another organisation ought to be established to protect the interests of the house-owners as well. Having met numerous house-owners over the years the lists of problems created by the tenants are innumerable.

Every single law of the country favours the tenants. If a tenant decides not to pay their bills and suddenly decides to move, then there is nothing the house-owners can do. No law secures the house-owners from such problems.

Sometimes it seems, the tenants are holding the landlords hostage in their own land. If any repair needed, then no matter what, the financial situation of the house-owner is a pressure is created and sometimes threats are issued too. Illegal connections are also made without the acknowledgement of the owners. Some tenants even refuse to share the costs of hiring security guards, cleaners and gardeners.

I wonder why Mr Noor fails to suggest the necessity of an organisation which protects the interests of the house-owners?

Or are we to understand that all the house-owners in Uttara are extremely cruel?

Shaqor
Dhaka

Childhood disability

Sir, More than 1000 children become disabled each year in Bangladesh through birth defects, accidents, mentally handicapped or physically dwarfed in want of iodine and Vitamin A. A study on nutritional blindness in 1982-83 estimated that each year 900,000 under-six children suffered from eye disease due to Vitamin A deficiency and 30,000 children lost their eyesight.

According to a UNICEF Report 800 million people live in iodine-deficient environment of whom 600 million are in Asia, 100 million in Africa, 60 million in Latin America and the balance in isolated groups in parts of Europe. About 130 million of these 800 million people suffer from goitre, three million suffer from cretinism and million more from mental deficiencies.

Therefore, government and NGOs here should take initiative to fight against such disabilities.

Mostafa Sohel
Dhaka

Let's go and see the Bridge

Sir, Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge needs no introduction. Much has been said and written about it earlier.

The monumental bridge has opened the flood-gate of opportunities for the promotion and development of tourism in our country. Many domestic tourists and foreigners in the metropolitan city of Dhaka are interested in sight-seeing tour to the Jamuna bridge.

We would like to request Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, our national tourism organisation to kindly operate a daily six to eight hours sight-seeing tour to the Jamuna bridge from BUET head office premises to western part of the bridge at a reasonable rate of tariff in non-airconditioned buses to quench the thirst of the tourists.

O H Kabir
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Pleasant peace procession

Sir, In 1971 Bangladesh was born as an independent country — a sovereign state. Since then it is being nurtured by our own people, ruled by our own leaders, guided by our own politicians and administered by our own administration. This way our country has been brought up to about 27 years.

Why did the peace procession with so much strength, show, enthusiasm and grandeur took place?

We have established political peace, economic stability and growth, voting right of the people, fortified democracy in the country, entered into a water treaty with India and signed a peace agreement with Jh-

tage. For Bangladesh, transition to the new millennium will require the younger generation to be adequately equipped to ride on the wave of information technology.

In the end, I shall come back to my earlier emphasis on universal basic education and gender parity at all levels of the educational pyramid. Is that a utopia? May be, yes. But if our goal is not merely to interpret the world around us but social transformation, a fusion of knowledge and utopia is an imperative. As Henry Lefebvre says, "All thinking that has to do with action has a utopian element. Ideas that stimulate action, such as liberty and happiness, must contain a utopian element. This is not a refutation of ideals, it is rather a necessary condition for the project of changing life."

And I believe, that is what education is all about. An intellectual elite of my generation is already marginalised through fragmentation and sometimes cooperation within the reductionist division of mental labour. We may liberate ourselves by participating in the metaphors and rhythms of what the excluded and the ordinary people are trying to do in extremely difficult and sometimes hostile circumstances. Only that can help us build a resolve to make human deprivation and degradation a matter of the past.

Otherwise wretchedness of the many will persist and as Theodor Adorno says, "Wretchedness remains. When all is said, It cannot be uprooted live or dead. So it is made invisible instead. (Minima Moralia)

OPINION

Say 'No' to Plastic Bags

Munira Khan

While returning from Malaysia, I had the opportunity of reading a very interesting article in a magazine which put a great impression on me. It is about a very common thing we receive free of charge every time we buy something. The writer termed it as rubbish for free — that is plastic bag. The simple plastic bag is an invisible, ubiquitous facts of life. Invisible because we don't notice them at all. Almost every retail transaction involves two things: money and plastic bags. Clothes, toiletries, groceries, cooked food almost comes in everything. According to her, a survey by the Malaysian chapter of plastic bag users (anonymous) offer these fascinating facts.

1) The average useful life of a plastic bag from the moment it is used to wrap something to the moment it is discarded is 16 to 34 minutes.

2) If one sen (a little more than one taka) is contributed for every plastic bag used in a transaction, the increase in Malaysian GDP would turn it to a developed country.

3) If all shoppers refused plastic bags, the resultant accelerator effect of reduced raw materials imports, reduced prices of goods, reduced cost of landfills and reduced servicing cost would reduce inflation by two per cent and the average life span by 2 years per day.

Anyway, these facts go for Malaysia, but we don't know whether there has been any survey made by the plastic bag users of Bangladesh. It is a sad fact of life that what is given free is not valued but the very plastic bags which are being discarded by us are very much a part of our modern life. These plastic bags are non-biodegradable. Considering the short life span, it is ironic that they hang around for so long not doing anything useful but harming the environment.

Once in a meeting I heard the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation explaining how the plastic bags — thrown by the users blocked the drains and what difficulty and plight they had to face to clean the jammed drains of Dhaka city. Even if we visit the riverside, seaside or the countryside, we won't be spared the sight of those white, red or black bags littering the landscape, for far more years than the casual, moral littering will live.

But few years ago we used paper baskets, jute bags, straw bags, canvass bags for shopping and newspapers for wrapping. Some might say that we were not developed then. We still are not — but we sure consume an awful lot of plastic bags although we can save much money, if we use shopping bags made of our own raw materials as we used before.

We can also use cardboard boxes, which can be re-used, canvass bags, jute bags or thick plastic bags which we don't discard. We should exercise such habit to save our environment. In some developed countries, supermarkets offer discount if you refuse a plastic bag. They even have recycling centres where the consumers can recycle their plastic bags.

I know carrying the same shopping bags all the time will be difficult and quite a battle for acquiring new habits. But to save our environment we must give it a try. All we have to do is to think seriously and to say 'No' to plastic bags. We should start a campaign to reduce the production and use of plastic bags.

Maybe some day it will put us forward on the path of developed nation (pollution-free status) and our future generations may even thank us for leaving them more or less in a pollution free-world.

M Ali
Dhaka