

Life in Dhaka

Watch Out for the Peter's Principle

by A Husnain

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THE Peter's Principle or Pyramid is well known in the developed countries. We are also developing and progressing, therefore there is no reason why this modern game cannot be played in Bangladesh.

We cannot do without our formidable bureaucrats — the service which is civil in official terms. In view of their prestige, position, rank, and status, influence and network, they are the favourites for file-pushing, if not leg-pulling. Numerous books and articles have spanned on the subject on the mystique of the civil service, since the British Empire was in the formative stage.

Let us enjoy some Peter snafus spiced with aromatic masala. The name comes from the scientist Dr Laurence J Peter, whose late discovery (The Peter Pyramid, William Morrow & Co, 1966; and editions in other formats) is the inverted pyramid principle, which, he found, applied so deftly to the bureaucrats. The pyramid has a solid base, and top is akin to Mt Everest — lack of oxygen to thrive there for long.

The Peter Principle is for the individual, while the Peter Pyramid is for the system. As a system escalates to its level of incompetence. How this could be contained? The more popular term in the local circles is 'systems loss', about which we read so much these days. It is one of the rarest stable phenomenon in our fast changing society.

To win you must know why you lose. The bank-loan defaulters have become part masters in this evasive art, and know the science of rescheduling the over-ripe and over-matured loans and the mega interests piling up each successive year.

An afterthought: this interest principle applies in matters of the heart? Say, the love and affection between a mother and the child. Ultimately, after several decades, which is greater: the principle, or the interest? Of course, there is no need of rescheduling the daily dose of

affection.

Peter never thinks when he is writing, because for him it is impossible to do two things at the same time. Nothing unusual, as we find our public speakers apply this Peter Principle (PP) in the sense that they do not think while they are speaking — the flow can match any natural flood, and can easily beat the 1998 inundation which lasted for two months.

What is more remarkable is that our orators also do not find it necessary to think before and after the speeches. One paradox must be noted: the poor nations in the Third World are as busy as the developed nations, but with too many non-thinking problems. Since we are a bit restless and are in a hurry to develop fast to catch up with the North, we hardly find time to be sequential and systematic in our planning and deliberations. We are more moved by the vision of the future than the reality of duties of the present.

"The Americans have more time-saving devices, still do not get enough time to do the right things". Especially in foreign affairs. They like to work fast. For example, they are apt to release missiles too prematurely. We have more time-wasting devices than we can handle comfortably. We lack time-saving officials. Einstein's Theory is subjective or objective? The answer is tricky.

"People rise to their level of incompetence". Here they like short-cuts to save time, to devote extra man-hours to extra curricular activities of vested interests. However, it must be conceded that there is an element of selflessness prevailing, in the sense that the body is shared, sometimes democratically, sometimes exclusively.

"One man's ceiling is another man's floor". There is hardly

any space at the top apex of a pyramid. In the LDCs the replacements are difficult to find, and if found, it is difficult to place them at the top, because there is 0 vacancy up there. What sustains charismatic leadership, year after year; while those groomed have to wait inordinately? The deliberation is more important than the answer. There is no quick fix at the top leadership level.

One has to be clever to escape from one's own cleverness. This observation escapes notice unless pointed out. When it is realised, it is too late. The readers can think out own examples from their personal lives. Tip: analyse the curse and bondage of over-confidence. It over-rides everything.

"You are experienced when you can spot a previous mistake". First the self, then the others. The reversed protocol can play unusual tricks. What is the philosophy behind pilgrimages? If you had the chance to re-live your life, you should make the same mistakes earlier. That is another version of progress; or, it is a slow any of chasing wisdom. The latter can be detected only after the right application.

If facts do not confirm to the theory, stick to the theory. Or the propaganda stance. This application is very popular and is independent of time, place, and average personality.

"When simplicity is updated into a complex system, it is called progress." The more complex and dense the system, the more impressive it is to the outsiders. Complexity enjoys a false status. Tagore, for example, was not complex, hence it took a Nobel Prize to pry open his greatness.

"If you wish to have your way up, keep the boss busy", because an empty brain is a devil's

workshop, and may not work in your favour. Do not leave space for others and there will be no competition. If you were a sportsman, remember the playing field — no field, no play.

"After a pensioner is dead, he is informed formally by the office that his pension has been stopped". The poor fellow is never able to mail the acknowledgment. Rajuk is very much alive (in other worlds) but never acknowledges any letter or replies to it. When silence is golden?

"I am not afraid of death, only I do not want to be there when it happens" (Woody Allen, the comedian). In Bangladesh, it is possible to cite 10 other examples besides death.

Why most of us are so weak in History? Learn from history, or re-live it. If you cannot change the future, then bear it. That is what we are still doing. We seem to have a lot of patience. There is no consolation in the future nor comfort in the past. Choice: be a slave or a robot. Nobody likes the present, because it does not last. Lol and the moment is passed. Corollary: those who live in the past drive the latest model cars.

While autocracy is rule by one man, bureaucracy is rule by rules. Democracy is rule by the common people. What do we do with our bright chaps?

"There is an easy way to escape from a problem — solve it. Do not let it harden; try to dissolve it. If it cannot be hidden, evaporate it." Still one small problem remains: don't get caught.

Scientist A N Whitehead had clarity of mind: "the art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order." What are we doing? We change the previous orders, and order the present changes, and create more disorder for the future. Second warning: empty brains could be dangerous.

"There is a problem with the problem solvers" — what to do with them after the problem is solved. Make them Advisors so that they can point out more problems.

gift-giving as before — "but when it's time for the cutting, you just go home."

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India's NGOs: In the Line of Fire

Why is there such opposition to NGO activity? The uneasiness mainly stems from the erosion of power, interests and support base of many lobbies as a direct result of NGO activity. The NGOs' role in encouraging dissent and divergent opinion among people and their attempts to unite them to fight for common causes spells disquiet for many.



INDIAN non-government organisations (NGOs), who have in the past 50 years helped heighten awareness of human rights, social and environmental causes; build opinion; empower people; and mobilise communities into being active participants in the development process, are today being forced off the development rails by a clutch of powerful and resentful lobbies.

In a bid to minimise their influence, state governments, local politicians and administrators, business groups and even militant outfits are subjecting social activists of NGOs to violent attacks. Where force fails to work, vendetta comes in the shape of laws enforced to hamper their functioning.

The persecution of voluntary agencies came into the spotlight with the abduction and murder of social worker Sanjoy Ghose of the Association of Voluntary Agencies for rural development — Northeast (AVARD-NE) in Assam by the militant group, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).

Some of the other instances that have come to light are the banned People's War Group (PWG) forcing the NGO Samata to move out of the hill tracts of Visakhapatnam district, Andhra Pradesh. Samata was opposing a local mining project of a large business house on environmental grounds.

The banning of the Advaiti Mukti Sangathan (AMS), an NGO working in the western district of Khargone for empowerment of tribals, by the Madhya Pradesh government, is one more horror story. Even as Congress-I supporters of the deputy chief minister, Subhash Yadav, beat up AMS supporters, Chief Minister Digvijay Singh launched a tirade against NGOs demanding that the Centre route all NGO grants through the state government.

The most recent example of violence against an NGO has been in Kashipur town in Orissa where a local NGO was involved

in organising demonstrations and blockades over bauxite mining and processing in the area. Angry politicians and business groups got together and the police resorted to lathi charge and burnt down the NGO's field office at Kerpai, Kalahandi.

Why is there such opposition to NGO activity? The uneasiness mainly stems from the erosion of power, interests and support base of many lobbies as a direct result of NGO activity. The NGOs' role in encouraging dissent and divergent opinion among people and their attempts to unite them to fight for common causes spells disquiet for many. And, perhaps, equally disturbing is their access to funds for development which translated in a politician's language reads: getting a village road laid is no longer a legislator's trump card.

The reasons publicly stated by politicians and bureaucrats for their reservations towards NGOs, particularly those receiving big-scale foreign funding, are: the possibility of NGOs misusing funds to subvert Indian democracy, diluting its ideology and claiming tax benefits for private interests.

Corruption has been another stick to beat NGOs with. Sudha Nagari, executive director of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) had said in a recent interview to Outlook magazine that running NGOs "has become big business". The CSWB has blacklisted over 3,500 NGOs for failing to submit accounts on projects funded by the board.

Activists in the NGO sector say those who cry hoarse about NGO corruption often fail to notice the avenues of corruption kept wide open by the government itself. They say official blacklists, in fact, demonstrate the highly porous nature of state coffers.

The uneasiness of the Indian government over the growing NGO power is evident from its recent moves to strengthen bureaucratic control over NGOs. On March 10, 1997, erstwhile Union welfare minister B S Ramoowalia stated in Parli-

ament that a proposal to set up a committee to study the functioning of NGOs was under 'active consideration'. India Today reported in November 1997 that the prime minister's office has asked the Planning Commission to set up a panel to monitor NGOs.

In fact, monitoring is already on. The home minister of I K Gujral government, Inderjit Gupta, asked state governments to give a report on all NGOs receiving foreign funds. The Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) has provisions that can be used to control any organisation that receives donations. Already, the government has made it tough to get new FCRA registrations.

Further, existing laws are flexible enough to stifle even well-meaning groups. NGOs are still governed by the Societies Registration Act, 1860. State governments often irrationally modify various provisions of the act to control NGOs. In Uttar Pradesh, there is a provision requiring renewal of registration every five years. And in Tamil Nadu, the government can supersede the governing body of any organisation without notice and seize its property.

Another measure of control is new taxation laws. Till now, hospitals, educational institutions and charitable trusts were given specific tax exemptions. But the Expert Group for Simplification of Income Tax set up by I K Gujral government proposed that many of these benefits be withdrawn.

Current tax laws allow trusts and societies to build up their corpus and ensure sustainability of their work by transferring their annual income to the corpus, without attracting income tax. Now, the expert group has proposed that in case the spending falls short of 60 per cent of the income of the financial year, the shortfall will be subject to tax. There will be no provision for filing an tax exemption application to carry forward the extra money, for a specific purpose.

Another dampening move is the tightening of control over

CSE/Down To Earth Features

Elders Enlisted in Fight for Safe Rites of Womanhood

THE chairman of a Ugandan group which has won a United Nations award for its fight against female circumcision was once a firm upholder of the practice.

"When I was a young man, still growing, I used to support circumcision of girls very much," explains William Cheborion, chairman of the Sabiny Elders' Association.

"When I grew up and became a teacher," he adds, "I found out that it was a wrong practice." Now he and other members of the association have found a way of halting the practice that campaigners refer to as female genital mutilation (FGM), which can cause a variety of health complications — sometimes fatal — including prolonged bleeding, infection, infertility and difficulties in childbirth.

Worldwide, the UN Children's Fund, UNICEF, estimates that two million girls a year are circumcised, to preserve virginity, ensure marriageability and contain sexuality.

The problem with previous attempts to stop the practice was that they were coercive, and undermined the community's ability to reason for themselves," according to Jackson Chekweko, manager of a UN Population Fund (UNFPA) programme called Reproductive Educative And Community Health (REACH).

At one time, when the government was considering outlawing the practice, officials faced a storm of protest from the 150,000 Sabiny people in the east of the country — one of the few groups in Uganda who practise FGM.

Fears in the community that the government was about to impose a ban prompted a surge in circumcisions, as females faced social pressure to be cut in order to defend their cultural rights and identity.

Chekweko, himself an ethnic Sabiny, believes that the community's opposition to initial attempts to stop FGM was justified because "nobody from outside can come to influence a person's culture".

REACH set out to work with the Sabiny to bring about social change, rather than imposing foreign standards from above.

The instigator of the programme, former Population Fund director in Uganda, Francois Farah, knew that the project could never work unless it had the backing of the community.

Chekweko recalls: "They started with the elders, who are the custodians of this culture. Through a series of workshops, Farah's team informed Sabiny elders about the harmful effects of FGM."

"This REACH programme is your own programme," Farah

An estimated two million girls are circumcised every year in a practice that is often unhealthy and can be fatal. To encourage the campaign against the tradition, reports Gemini News Service, a special UN award has been given to a group of Ugandan elders who are educating their community about the issue. Elaine Eliah writes from Kampala

A dangerous tradition

Where female circumcision is most common

Table with 2 columns: Country and Percentage. Djibouti 98%, Somalia 98%, Eritrea 90%, Ethiopia 90%, Sierra Leone 90%, Sudan (north) 89%, Mali 75%, Burkina Faso 70%, Chad 60%, Ivory Coast 60%, Gambia 60%, Liberia 60%

An estimated 100m girls alive today have been genitally mutilated

More than 2m girls are believed to undergo the practice every year

Side-effects can include:

- Death, Haemorrhage, Shock, Infection, Pelvic inflammation, Sterility, Cysts, Birth complications, Psychological, emotional and sexual problems, Abscesses



Source: UNICEF

assured them.

He also promoted the concept that the Sabiny could retain their "cultural values" while rejecting "cultural practices" that were no longer useful or life-enhancing. "We all love our children. Does anybody want to do any harm to his or her child — particularly the girl child?"

The elders then spread the message to the rest of the community.

"We tell them about the harmful aspects, excessive bleeding, contracting AIDS, reduction of sexual pleasure and enjoyment," explains Chekweko.

The campaigners talk to everyone, young and old, men and women. Chekweko says they try to explain that it is wrong to pressure individuals into complying with generalisations such as the idea that one cannot get married or hold any position of responsibility without being circumcised.

"They respond, they ask questions, they try to under-

stand," says William Cheborion, the elders' association chairman. "We go with doctors who are qualified, who tell them exactly what is harmful."

Traditionally, the Sabiny circumcise adolescent girls in December of even-numbered years, and as the next circumcision season is now approaching, Chekweko and Cheborion recognise that the elders' association and the REACH staff have to step up their efforts to convince all members of the community.

"We are going to continue to go ahead, meet the mothers-in-law, meet the parents, meet the old generation who are resistant or who take long to respond," says Chekweko.

Cheborion recognises that "the occasion of the Sabiny girl becoming a woman needs celebration" but encourages families to find a safer ritual with which to usher girls into womanhood.

It is all right, he says, to have the parties, dancing and

gift-giving as before — "but when it's time for the cutting, you just go home."

Much has been achieved. In 1994, before the start of the programme, 854 girls were circum-

cised. Two years later, the number dropped to 544.

Chekweko says that receiving the UNFPA's Population Award, presented at a ceremony at UN headquarters in New York in July, will help spur them on.

"REACH will continue to empower girls with the ability to say 'No', he says, "even if their parents say they must, because it is a matter of life and death."

The writer is a freelance journalist who specialises in issues affecting children.

Will the Guns Decimate Bodo Culture?

Utpal Borpujari writes from New Delhi

"In a world where roadsides are lined with relief camps, housing survivors of massacres, where armed might makes the law, the everyday activities of the people...reflect an affirmation of life."



Director Pinky Brahma Choudhury with "Sola Master" a legend in the Boda "Gaan" folk theatre, during the marking of the film "Duphang-Ni Solo" — PTI photo

litical drama but also remind us about the dangers of forgetting and indifference towards our culture," says Brahma Choudhury.

Thus, the camera in "Duphang-ni Solo", shown recently at the India International Centre here, follows "Sola Master", a trailblazer in the "gaan" tradition with 45 plays to his credit, and tales like that of a river that changed its course in anger after a fisherman threw half-eaten rice into it.

"Or that of a woman, who on losing her child in a wild fire, is transformed into a bird which

returns every autumn to lament the loss — which is a reminder of the plight of the people," says the graduate from Pune's Film and Television Institute of India (FTII).

Brahma Choudhury says her film, produced under the banner of Delhi-based Rajindra Films by Neeraj Sujl, is aimed at making viewers to pause and reflect.

"Rather than drive home a moral, the film prefers to suggest some hope through the tales and incidents of daily life," says Brahma Choudhury. So, it takes the viewer through the heavy popularity of

the plays performed in "gaan" in a region where other forms of entertainment are rare even as it shows glimpses of the hard life the performers and other people alike due to the changing situation.

And this is one reason Brahma Choudhury shows very little of the violence which has shaken the very base of the Bodo society — in fact, it is nothing more than a few glimpses of relief camps, security personnel guarding busy market places, blown-off bridges and bullet-marked and slogan-painted walls of houses. "I have given very little em-

phasis on the violence, and I did it deliberately because I am more concerned about its effects and did not want to make the whole thing look sensational as over the years the effect of the bloodshed has been much deeper," she says.

The film, shown at the Mumbai Short Film Festival earlier this year, also deliberately uses "gaan" — a form of folk art which has its origins in Bengali Jatra but was assimilated into the Bodo culture seamlessly — to make its point. "I could have taken any other original Bodo art form, but I wanted to show the openness of cultures, that cultural heritages are things to be shared with — I don't want to be a fanatic," she says.

During the entire film, which has cinematographer Sameer Mahajan capturing the natural beauty of the region effectively, the viewers never get emotionally involved in the dramatic incidents in them.

"I want the viewers to pause and reflect, just as the gaan plays make their viewers do," says Brahma Choudhury, whose student film in FTII — "Ether" — was screened at various international film festivals in Tokyo, Tel Aviv, Edinburgh, Mumbai and Calcutta.

The film is replete with shots of broken bridges, "the cause of this, for me, is the break in communication with others and with ourselves."

"In a world where roadsides are lined with relief camps, housing survivors of massacres, where armed might makes the law, the everyday activities of the people, as shown in the film reflect an affirmation of life," the director says.

Thus, one sees, in various shots of the film, women at work on their looms weaving dresses on cloth, children playing at the river bank and elderly men sipping tea at the roadside stalls waiting just like the playwright waiting to narrate yet another tale of hope.

— PTI/APB

Garfield



by Jim Davis

