

### All Eyes on the Port

Chittagong's potential as a shipping hub for Southeast Asia had never been in doubt. Chittagong's proximity through overland routes to Southeast Asia, particularly north-eastern states of India, Myanmar, Thailand and parts of southern China, gives it an alluring prospect as a regional port. This fact has already been acknowledged by officials of BIMSTEC or "Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand for Economic Cooperation". As reports in this paper have already pointed out, BIMSTEC countries are seriously considering Chittagong as a gateway to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Proposals to upgrade overland communication, in the form of Trans-Asian Highway, are also on the table. It is now upto Bangladesh to improve and expand Chittagong's cargo-handling capacity in order to turn this promise into reality.

However, this is where Bangladesh appears to be faltering again. Just as this opportunity is opening up, vested interest groups in Chittagong are leaving no stones unturned to make the port an unpalatable choice for both users and investors. Newspaper reports suggest that 22 trade unions representing various categories of dock workers are threatening to go on a 24-hour strike on Nov 23, as part of their on-going campaign to prevent construction of a privately-owned container terminal at Patenga and also privatisation of the port itself.

Such agitation against port privatisation has been going on for some time and, with each shut-down, Chittagong's ratings in the eyes of users go down a notch or two. But that still does not prevent local political bosses, including influential ruling party leaders, from supporting — or even instigating — such actions. The worst part appears to be the government's wavering attitude. Having taken the long-overdue decision to allow private investment to expand port facilities, the government now appears to be dithering in the face political pressure.

There is no doubt that Chittagong port cannot realise its potential as a regional hub without rapid development of its infrastructure and significant improvement in its efficiency rate. To achieve these results, private participation, in terms of investment and management, is vital. The government needs to show steady resolve in removing all obstacles to the privatisation process. Only this will send a clear signal that Bangladesh has the vision and the will to emerge as a leading player in regional economic growth.

### No Amputation

The swoop on squatting street vendors, this time spearheaded by BDR reserves, has enforced ease-of-movement for the pedestrians. The smooth passage gained through what may appear as a justified assertion of authority, has given a sense of relief which for all practical purposes seems set to be temporary, almost fleetingly so. The riflemen being on an adhoc call of duty are certain to return to their fold leaving the clean look in charge of the tried-out motley policemen. What happens then?

The vendors by the sheer force of economic necessity — compelling for them to make their both ends meet and equally so for the fact that they are catering to active demands of low and middle income consumers — will file back into the spots to resume their trade. In fact it will be downright economic foolishness to turn a blind eye to certain productive processes they have generated and kept in motion in an otherwise bleak context of industrial and agricultural sluggishness in our mainstream economy. Many small trades thrive on their kind of retail network. Vending, even of the street variety, is more than a necessary evil; it is, for all practical purposes a necessary economic function that must be encouraged for what it is worth.

It has to be streamlined and given the time and space to grow as part and parcel of the city's burgeoning market-place. A three-fold strategy can be adopted to accommodate them: First, it should be possible on week-ends to shut off particular portions of streets to traffic and turn these into exclusive pedestrian markets such as some European cities have; secondly, we could have low-cost multi-storied structures in appropriate locations and allot its cubicles to vendors on hire-purchase basis, and thirdly, there is some scope for their relocation away from the crowded places with inducements thrown in and media announcements put out on the change of site for public benefit.

It is time the Prime Minister's idea for circular railway to spur the growth of satellite townships saw some action. That holds the answer to the restive proliferation of street vending in the metropolis.

### Comfort for Clinton

Unexpected Democratic gains in the current elections to the two chambers of the American Congress do not materially change the Republican grip over the US legislature. But it sends a big and bold message to the GOP asking it not to ride the sleazy Bill-Monica wish-horse.

A kind of disgust with the Republicans' not-too-covert bid to cash in on the Bill-Monica affair can be justifiably read in the American voting pattern. The affair that was supposed to break Bill, rather than inhibiting Bill's popularity rating, spurred it. As if to save him from the consequences of his utterly bad and even foolish showing, the Americans wanted to say all that's private and we aren't interested there, but for us public you must lead on.

Newt Gingrich now will have to innovate a new tack, his overt Clinton-baiting having not only failed but been rebuffed as well. The Republican stance has already mellowed down to saying we never meant seriously to impeach him and we should be satisfied with a reprimand.

The vote has come as a big shot in the arm of the Clinton camp. The White House celebrated the outcome uproariously although sans champagne and with only diet coke. This is bound to do good to the American state machine which could be out of the doldrums in more ways than one. The Democratic gains in the Congress were buttressed by their surprise successes in the gubernatorial polls. California, the biggest state and New York, the most important, fell to Democrats after long years. The message is this has been no freak development.

# "How Women Make a Country Literate"

**T**ODAY, the best informed survives. Access to knowledge is itself a kind of power, perhaps more important than any other. Unfortunately there are have-nots in the ecology of knowledge. The have-nots are invariably the poor but within them the women. The women are what Amartya Sen calls history's "persistent losers". The question that I want to pose today is how best we alter the situation. Openly confronting the matter of female illiteracy and their lack of access to information at all levels? Or carrying the issue onto the momentum of educating all? If a society pursues the goal of universal basic education and that of equal opportunity at all levels of education and technology access, why put women first?

The answer is obvious in a societal context where social hierarchy and consequent family-structures stress the relative importance of men and boys over women and girls. As I point out in this column last week, if a culture dictates that girls will grow only to serve a future husband's family, formal education may be viewed as a waste of time and girls will not be encouraged to go to school. The situation is exacerbated by poverty. When a family can barely afford to send one child to school, it is the girl child who is kept at home.

In such a situation, if the policy framework takes a neutral stance on the status of girls and women acknowledging equal rights and opportunities without making provisions for a mechanism that these rights are protected, women may find themselves no better off than before. It is only an affirmative and pro-active approach to improving the status of women and their access to education that can overcome

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some of the cultural and economic factors which place them in unequal position.

A good example from our neighboring country India is cited by V.K. Ramachandran in a dialogue on the issue. He refers to an article by Robin Jeffrey entitled, "How Women Made Kerala Literate" and his argument is as follows:

"In the first decade of the century the state of Baroda in Gujarat and the state of Travancore, now part of modern Kerala, (both were princely states, and not part of British India) had the same levels of male literacy and both of them had state-declared policies of mass-education. Why is it that Kerala is at the top today and Baroda, far behind? Because at that time Kerala took up the issue of women's literacy in a very serious way; and Baroda remained far behind in that respect. The experience has been that unless the question of female literacy is tackled specifically, larger plans for literacy will not succeed."

In Kerala during the recent mass literacy programme, women were absolutely critical to the success of the programme, particularly women educators from traditionally excluded communities like the fisherfolk. In certain sections of the Muslim community where certain sections of the Muslims were less literate, women educators made the difference, and unless the educators are willing to destabilize the patriarchal establishment by taking up specific issues of female literacy, the literacy programme will be unsuccessful.

The Kerala experience confirms the importance of women's literacy in creating new levels of human development. Kerala's life expectancy today is 69 years for men and 73 for women. Infant mortality in 1990 was 17 per 1000. Kerala has clearly shown that if fertility rates are to be brought down, infant mortality and deaths rates must be brought down and if that is to happen, female survival and education must be assured. In other words the choices for and capabilities of women in Kerala have been enlarged and in the process their entitlement and access to re-



sources and decision-making. Also important victories have been won by the disadvantaged people against domination by higher caste and the ignominy of untouchability.

But if we look at many other parts of the sub-continent Amartya Sen's well-known indictment regarding 100 million missing women, who have been doomed to premature graves because of gender bias in various forms, still remains painfully valid. Even though primary health care is a public good women are less equal in their access to it as many other public goods.

Such lack of access can be broken down, as the Kerala experience illustrates, by dismantling the barrier of women's access to information and enhancing women's capabilities through active and full participation in the enterprise of learning at all levels. Benefits of knowledge particularly technological advances therefore, must be made more equally available to women.

How can women become stakeholders in a technology driven development paradigm, if they are excluded from learning how these technologies work either to their advantage or to their detriment? Technology may be (and I have my doubts) gender neutral but its use often is not. An examination of the prevailing and emerging technologies as well as who are using them and to what end, can reveal a great deal about women and their role in productive and service sectors as well as their social status. When one set of people do the work and the other set of people own both knowledge and resource power, the dominant-dominated power-relationships become apparent.

The most insidious use of power in such a power-relation has been vividly portrayed in a film "Children of Mini Japan" regarding child labour in

Sivaski. There are interviews with local match factory-owners in that dry district with very little income possible from the land. The factory owners, locally powerful as they are, have dictated that the kids ought not to be sent to school. They ought to be working in the factories and be grateful for being allowed to do so. Systematically degraded as they are, the children themselves and their parents say exactly the same things as the factory-owners have tutored them to say and never about their real interests. Or what Paul Frierer calls 'a culture of silence' prevails.

It is, therefore, no wonder that in some communities in the hinterland of our own country, the power-holders are in direct opposition to women's education and the women, structurally oppressed and isolated as they are, apparently acquiesce since their muted grievances are never heard in the corridors of power. For the local power-holders such programmes are destabilising of the social hierarchy. Literacy makes women aware of their rights and demands that they can make of the leadership, in the household, in the community or at higher echelons. Pillars of society cannot allow such outcasts to share the exclusive privileges of the enchanted circle of the wise and the wealthy.

Literacy movement, as has been seen in Kerala can become the entry point for agrarian transformation, and a place where girls and boys, women and men of the peasantry and agricultural laborer households

get together. "When that happens, the literacy movement itself becomes a vehicle for social transformations in the village. Then, certain governments get worried because literacy programmes can make a political difference" (V.K. Ramachandran).

In that context, the rhetoric of compassion is self-deception by the compassionate at its worst and at its best a delusion. If I may take liberty with Leo Tolstoy by substituting the gender, allow me to quote him:

"I sit on a woman's back choking her and making her carry me and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for her and wish to lighten her load by all means except getting off her back."

What is perhaps more important than compassion is for the women and all the disadvantaged segments of the populations to get together and get organized. If I may borrow from Amartya Sen and repeat what I said last week, in politics as in economics, it is demand that influences more. If the women and the disadvantaged men can make a demand collectively, strongly and persistently, that demand will be met tomorrow or the day after.

In a society deeply divided between those in a strong position to defend their right and those who are excluded and whose demands are often not recognized as legitimate, the central notion of solidarity transcends a certain individualistic conception of right. Self-preservation and realization are not achieved through each individual pursuing her/his own vaguely understood interest, but through social solidarity. It is only through such solidarity groups that the excluded and the outcast can break out of their closure exclusion and categorization.

## 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.**

### Who is more corrupt?

Sir, We as Bangladeshis are often viewed as "corrupt" by the donors, tourists, expatriate workers and by our own well-provided people. But I wonder whether our people are aware that these very people and agencies who regard us as "corrupt" are taking the maximum advantage of the same evil.

If one visits the bilateral or multilateral organisations, one will see the spouses of expatriate staff working there, either as consultants or as full-time staff, drawing fat salaries in US dollar or equivalent taka. These people do not have a work permit, neither do they pay any income tax to the Government of Bangladesh. On inquiring, they might say that they are paying for their home country but that is not true in most cases (they are not able to produce any valid papers supporting their statement). Interestingly, many of these people wrangle out work-permits through friends in the garment factories and garment buying offices and continue to live here for unlimited period. Or else, they live here as tourists and fly out of the country every three months to renew their visas. Their employers are well aware of such practices.

Should it not be the responsibility of these agencies who claim to be working in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh — to assist the government by ensuring that the people they recruit or contract have all their "papers" in order, according to the laws of the host country?

Two things are happening as a result of such oversight. One, the country is losing a huge amount of tax revenue because both these expatriates and our local consultants do not pay any income tax. Two, by recruiting or contracting these expatriates — more by virtue of being a "foreigner" than by their skills — the young potential people in our country do not get any job opportunities in these agencies.

The garment sector is no better. Many of the buying offices and factories recruit high-school and college graduates from Far Eastern countries — most of whom also do not have work permits and do not pay any income tax and thus destroying the job market for our people.

If the government is really keen to earn more revenue for the development of our country and to rehabilitate the flood-affected people, as well as to ensure the creation of more job opportunities for the people of Bangladesh, it should start by enlisting the expatriates and local consultants in these agencies and offices and see if they have any permission to work in this country and whether they pay any taxes.

Our income tax inspectors are too busy trying to pursue the ones who already pay their taxes regularly but they do not even bother to find out about the ones who work in these above-mentioned agencies and yet have never bothered to submit their tax returns or open an income tax file with the concerned authority.

Suborno Siddique  
3/10 Kathalbagan, Dhaka

### See my visage or spoil the mirror

Sir, Ever since we became a free nation, one of the weighty calls chanted so frequently by the leaders at all occasions has been "hold aloft the country's image abroad." This has been directed not only to

### Restricted traffic circle

Sir, It is a great relief that our armed personnel have taken the challenge of easing traffic congestion of the city. So far they have done a commendable job. I request them to remove all the causes of traffic congestion prevailing in Dhaka. Areas where such congestions are prevalent are mainly near the traffic circles. All kinds of public transport stands/stops are located near these spots.

Consequently, undisciplined vehicle operators, pedestrians and passengers of those public transports cause serious congestion for others. Traffic circle is mainly designed to facilitate



traffic to cross an intersection unopposed. It makes all vehicles unidirectional while each enter in to cross the intersection. At this roundabout, each vehicle operator controls himself and makes his way in a carping and sharing manner. They may become slow, but shouldn't standstill. It is this stand-stillness which helps accumulate huge number of vehicles of various kinds. I feel such accumulation is the cause of long traffic jam. Traffic circles where vehicles are allowed to go on their own (Saat Rasta, Kakrail near the Chief Justice's Residence, Sahbagh, Shapla Chatr, eastern end of Manik Mia Avenue and Gulshan) do not experience jam as seen at traffic circles controlled by the police. The best example is Sanargaon Hotel end traffic circle.

Initially, the armed personnel may try out by building makeshift traffic circles at such sites with sand-bags to find the outcome, before building permanent ones. Besides this, buses may be allowed to follow only the lane close to footpath

Bangladeshis living abroad or foreign service officials but also to assemblies, rallies and meetings held here in the country.

Now one could consider for whom this image is and how can this be held aloft. The foreigners know what Bangladesh is for her tradition of hospitality, sincerity, flood, rain, deluge, tidal bores and tornadoes. The diplomatic missions working here much outweigh and outshine Bangladeshis living abroad for their knowledge and command of the situation available through the media and their own network.

Surely the Bangladeshis living abroad conduct themselves in an orderly manner — are on time in workplaces, never steal or break the law of the land, lead a peaceful social life and have a reputation for their diligence and sincerity. So a part of the image is already there. But what pictures do we and the missions get here? Counterfeiting of US dollars, passport, warrant, marksheet, certificate, adulteration of baby food, medicine, history of liberation struggle, killing of Father of the Nation and impeding judgements, hijacking ballot and tender box, beating up investigators, forging driving licence, late attendance in government offices, loadshedding, fake police officials, wrong pathological reports, killing benefactors, inordinate delays in project implementation, illegal arms in possession of uniformed personnel, extortion and terrorism in broad daylight, leaking of question papers, incest and rare example of honesty? Besides, the foreigners themselves see thousands of beggars in all traffic signals, black smoke, traffic jams and extreme pollution of the environment.

Now why is this chanting of "holding aloft image"? Do they mean that the true image has not been reflected? Your visage will be refracted and reflected in a normal mirror. That is physics.

Iftekhar Hamid  
29, Nawabpur, Dhaka

### Using time, wasting time

Sir, In the eve of the final match recent Wills International Cup, a patient's father started yelling impatiently. I asked her why he was doing so, since the doctor is here and will attend his patient. She replied that since morning she had severe abdominal pain and had therefore gone to the emergency unit of one of the biggest government hospitals of the city, but there was no doctor there! They waited for quite some time, but in vain. Therefore they had to go to a private clinic, where one doctor saw her but another doctor whom she was referred to for a scan didn't turn up till 7pm! That is why her father was so frustrated, angry and impatient now. I understand that, any father with a very sick daughter would be under such circumstances.

A R Choudhury  
Uttara, Dhaka

### Women as defense people

Sir, We strongly believe that the women of our country are as skilled as the Pakistani and Indian women.

It would have been good for the country if the present government took bold initiative to recruit female cadets for the Air Force, the Navy and the Army in order to keep pace with time and needs of the 21st century. In our Liberation War in 1971 a large number of women took active part to help assist the freedom fighters against the enemies, but a very few of them got cognizance of the civil society and of the government.

Keeping this in mind, we request the government to take steps for the recruitment of female cadets in the defense services.

Abul Ashraf Noor  
Uttara, Dhaka-1205.

### Women's university

Sir, A separate women's university now has become a necessity. The existing educational institutions' environment for the female students is not so healthy; in fact it is pathetic. Women feel insecure and are not as free as they were in their schools and colleges.

So the existing universities should remain, but plan for separate women's universities should be undertaken as soon as possible. Education Ministry can transform some important women's colleges into universities, so that more women can develop them in their fields and guardians do not feel insecure for the safety of their daughters.

Tanji Tanim  
Dhaka

### During jumma prayers

Sir, All are aware that Jumma prayers on Fridays is one of the most respectable religious gathering that takes place in all the mosques all over the world. I would like to bring to the notice the following unwanted incidents that takes place in the mosques.

I, myself, along with my teenage son regularly attend the Jumma prayers on every Friday in a mosque located in Jigatala area. I have noticed that a particular group of senior citizens of that locality invariably enter the mosque a minute before the commencement of prayers and they force the younger groups to move from the front space (which they occupy long before the prayer starts) as if the space has been allocated permanently for them only.

We know that a total of 10 rakats of namaz usually takes place during the Jumma prayers. Four rakats are to be completed by each individual on their own. Two rakats are to be prayed under the leadership of the Imam and then another four rakats to complete the prayer. It has been observed that some people appear in the mosque only to say the two rakats namaz with the Imam and invariably try to get space in the front line by pushing and dashing others and then go off as soon as two rakats of namaz is finished; by creating trouble for others, when others must have already started the rest of four rakats of namaz to complete the prayer. My question is: why do they have to cross all the way to get space in the front by creating trouble for others just for two rakats namaz, while they can easily do that without disturbing anyone standing in one of the lines at the back easily?

Dr. Sabrina Q. Rashid  
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

### Save Us from Chaotic Traffic in DRA

On behalf of the school children and the parents of this city, it is with great regret I would like to bring to the notice of the authorities concerned that we have been facing a tremendously chaotic traffic during school hours in Dhanmondi area, specially Road No. 27 (old), where a good number of schools are located. It has been a long time that the traffic situation could not be brought under control permanently. I am sure, this is not because of insufficient traffic police force or any other reasons but purely because of inefficiency and lack of appropriate know-how in controlling the traffic in that particular area.

During the last few weeks all of us have in the meantime experienced how successfully the Military and Naval police managed the most unruly traffic in some parts of the city. My question is how could they do it so successfully and why can't our traffic police (meant for traffic control) do it the same way? Is this because of the lack of traffic knowledge? Is this because of improper training they have been given? Is this because of intentional reluctance? Is this because of the lack of traffic education? Whatever the reasons, I personally, on behalf of the city dwellers (specially

the TAX PAYERS), express my long-standing frustration and disappointment.

As we are all aware, all parents have to drop their children to schools five days a week. This is a continuous process that we have to follow until our children are grown up for their college and university. One can imagine what a tremendous mental stress and pressure we and our children have to bear every day during school hours, between 7:30 and 9:30 in the morning and again during break hours between 12:30 and 2:30 in the afternoon. It has become an inhuman traffic atmosphere all around Road 27 during the said hours for both the children and their parents. Something has to be done to straighten up the chaotic traffic on an emergency basis to save us from this situation. I would sincerely request the authorities concerned to take up the matter very seriously.

In this context I would like to give few suggestions which may help in easing the ongoing traffic jam at Road No. 27 in Dhanmondi Residential Area:

- During the peak hours (from 7:00 am to 9:00 am and from 12:30 pm to 2:30 pm) the whole road could be brought under ONE-WAY traffic system, either the way from the Mirpur Road point towards Satmasjid Road or the other way round — whichever appears to be feasible.
- All U-turns and Right Turns will have to be officially banned on that road during peak hours to facilitate commuters' movement.
- No motorized and non-motorized vehicles should be allowed to park beside the main road during these peak hours.
- Official notifications must be issued to all the school authorities immediately to circulate among the vehicle owners (parents) to strictly follow the traffic rules for maintaining smooth traffic movement.
- A penalty system may also be introduced so that both drivers and the owners of vehicles are cautious and conscious in maintaining the law and order situation by any means.
- If the above suggestions are found feasible, then we have to provide one more option for all the vehicles to turn back through another road which also needs to be made ONE-WAY during the peak hours. For example, I am commuting every day from Gulshan to Dhanmondi to drop my children, one in Sunbeams School (Road 27) and the other in Mastermind

was nothing but a recreation. Do people of other countries like China and Japan also do the same: leave all work and studies to have fun! That's too only to watch but not to play. If we played too then it would have been some achievement, but only to sit and watch for hours together giving up all the normal activities, for days together, must be singular to our country only. That too getting into this euphoria every few months, forgetting all other vital things at hand. Even the media were so engaged with this that they had forgotten all the pending cases of rapes in university, murder of Shazneen and Rubel etc.

Is watching games so important that students should completely forget about their books for a few days at a stretch. This was never so when we were students. If such is the crazy craze days, then our poor country should abstain from hosting such matches in future, for we can hardly afford to keep our students away from their classes and workers away from their jobs. We can't afford this luxury both in money expenditure and waste of time.

What about the devastating flood which has reduced so many people to poverty and a homeless state. And here we are, instead of sharing their sorrow and helping them, having a great time ourselves indulged in an absolute luxury like the Wills cricket match in our own city. It will indeed serve some purpose if the money earned here (if it is at all more than what is spend on it) is used to give low interest loans to the helpless farmers passing their days in utter gloom while the rest of us are engaged in merry making, without any feeling of remorse. In fact those who have been working for the flood-stricken people may have been lured away from their vital but boring work to the more interesting cricket tournament. What a timing for the match!

We could at least have waited a few more months till our poor people had been helped properly. Couldn't we have sacrificed this much of pleasure for our fellow countrymen? If we don't help them in distress at least we shouldn't be merry in their hour of distress. It is not much to ask!

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Azad Hafiz

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Saiful Karim  
Jigatala, Dhaka