

Project Issues

It is a known fact that in terms of preparing and designing projects, utilising or absorbing external assistance and implementing projects our track-record has been anything but satisfactory.

An in-depth World Bank review under the picturesque title "Demystifying A Process: The Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) in Bangladesh" has made three jolting deductions: (a) WB projects are being implemented by us at 40 per cent lower efficiency notch than the global average;

Unmet physical targets, mid-term evaluation leading to wholesale or partial jettisoning of projects, project carry-overs crowding out new development schemes have routinely made us pinpoint the pitfalls in the system.

One most important factor for a turn-around would be to improve our negotiating skill drawing on the talent in the private sector.

At one point in time our cumulative pipeline bulge stood at 5 billion US dollars, perhaps a record hump among the developing countries.

Please Heed the Arsenic Threat

While politics is keeping our attention riveted to the undoing of a public meeting and a 60-hour continuous national standstill, and such other topics, the world is being told about what indeed is Bangladesh's greatest challenge at the moment.

Why this when at least 20 million people in 43 out of the total 64 districts are already drinking every day of their life water heavily polluted with arsenic? And specially when the contamination area keeps spreading, inexorably?

Surface and recycled water seems to be the answer. How will people get it? This will entail gigantic projects costing billions of Taka.

Not a Feminine Fisticuff

This is one politically tinged rumpus which might not evoke any supportive statement from either of the two major parties in national politics for what their respective girl student wings did to stage it at the Badrunnesa Girls' College Hostel on Tuesday night.

Seen through a normal frame of mind there was nothing particularly wrong in asking for a higher food charge provided of course this was justified by prices, but at the same time these should have been a genuine effort on the part of the hostel management to accommodate any differing view over the rate of increase.

True, a student wing could try to capitalise on an issue like this to steal a popularity march over its rival on the campus. Even allowing for that, we do not see how such a matter that could boil over in a way that produced slanging matches between girls' cracker-bursting and outsider intrusion.

RECENTLY I had a unique learning experience. My teachers have been small farmers and resource-poor women in the hinterland of Bogra, Rangpur and Dinajpur.

Why? Let me share with you what I heard from them and relate the experience.

I met a group of farmers in a village in Chirir Bandar thana in Dinajpur district. They are small farmers, their holdings ranging from 1/2 to 3 acres. They grow late tomato immediately after harvesting transplanted Aman.

What they have been doing for the last 2-3 years, is to bring their product at a common collection centre in the village market on a scheduled day.

One farmer told me that he could get around 25,000 taka from an acre under tomato. But they have a problem. If for some reason, the buyers cannot come or the trucks cannot ply on the road they have to dispose off their produce or simply give it away.

On a political party calls a 'hartal' and the road is barricaded. Or, there may be factional strife among local power holders. The highways and connecting roads are blocked and they become hostages.

I heard a similar story in Mithapukur thana in Rangpur. I was travelling from Mithapukur thana centre to Rangpur town. On the way I found heaps of 'Potol' by the roadside. I stopped and talked with the growers assembled there.

Next day, I was in a rather remote village Bogra. Two middle-aged women, Ayesha and Ayesha are both members of the village-samity of an NGO. They have invested in household poultry enterprises with

"We Shall Overcome"

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micro-credit from the Samity. First year they did well. They cleared off their debt with the sale-proceeds of eggs and live chicken and still had some profit.

One of their husbands tried to reach the government poultry farm at the district town for medicine and advice. But he was delayed. There was a transport



A Z M Obaidullah Khan

strike. By the time he could come back with the required medicine, 70 per cent of the chicken were dead.

Meanwhile one of the younger members of the Samity has been trained by the NGO as a bare-foot poultry doctor. The problem is availability of vaccines and medicines. The vaccines for Newcastle disease are more often than not without any efficacy.

and anyway the shelf-life is very short. How can they circumvent the problem? Again, the NGO they belong to comes to their assistance. The NGO is able to import from across the border digestible vaccines which lasts for a month.

Let us turn to the fast-growing countries in Asia and analyze their, transformation pro-

cesses at earlier stages. As economies grow, subsistence food-production, though still important for household food-security gradually but definitely yields to a market-oriented diversified production-system.

The diversification in agricultural production in Asia can be seen at the aggregate level by the pattern of production growth in cereals compared to other high-value crops and

products. As Delgado and Siamwalla point out, for all Asian countries, livestock production grew at 6.4 percent per year, and production of vegetables and fruits at 4.4 percent, whereas cereal production increased at 2.7 percent annually during 1973-96.

The pace of such change has been much slower in South Asia compared to South-east Asia. For Bangladesh, such a transition is only incipient, although perceptible at farmers' fields.

The problems are: limited investment on education and technology-access of women and men frames to make crop/product choice decisions and move relatively freely between crops and other enterprises, the lack of development of rural finance system at the grassroots level particularly since such diversification requires lumpy cash input a few times a year; the uncertainty of secure property rights or the absence of land-market; inadequate investment for improving general transport, communications and market infrastructure; and even more limited support-services, including health, sanitation and nutrition, to transform the income-benefit from commercialization into broader human welfare benefits.

Further, it is essential that government policies facilitate such transition in a manner that benefits the poor and does not simply replace subsistence-related production risks with new market and policy failure risks which may be even more devastating to the poor. Import-

tant policy-goals should include avoidance of trade-stocks and sequencing of input and output market reform (Peter Hazel and Mark Rosegrant).

Having said that I am more troubled than ever before. Yes, the producers are ready and resilient. But there is a big 'if', a fundamental constraint. How can such policy-choices at macro-level and effective participation at micro-level take place in a political culture of intolerance at its best and undisguised violence at its worst? When the silent majority of the people are hostages to muscle-bound power game on both sides of the aisle all the economic rhetoric about pro-growth macro-economic and trade policies, liberalized and competitive domestic market and high domestic savings rate complemented by private and foreign capital inflows sound hollow. Human development, critical investments in health, education and nutrition for all people turn out to be hypocritical devices to keep the dominant-dominated structural pre-disposition unchanged.

This fundamental political problem has been recognized, but swept under the carpet for fear of high cost of social disruption. So, I do not place my hopes at the higher echelons of social and political hierarchy. I place my hope in the deepest sense with the tomato-farmers in Chirirbandar, or the women entrepreneurs in Bogra who will continue their struggle in the expectation that life will improve for their off-spring.

As I reminisce in a state of siege for sixty hours, I hum the tune of my long-past younger days:

We shall overcome! We shall overcome someday!

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.

The wrong shepherds

Sir, For the millennium then, the people of Bangladesh have experienced the heavenly HARTAL. Why are our politicians to be obsessed with HARTAL? What good do they seek to accomplish by calling HARTAL, month after month, year after year, and arguably, decade after decade?

Every time they call for this absurd event, the country is losing millions of dollars. I suppose that, maybe there is a good reason behind it, and maybe my brain cannot fathom the true meaning of this event.

calling HARTAL for every single reason, regardless of its merit, bring to the society? Every time they call for this absurd event, the country is losing millions of dollars. I suppose that, maybe there is a good reason behind it, and maybe my brain cannot fathom the true meaning of this event.

I sure would appreciate if some intellectual of our country would dare to take few of his/her precious moments and answer this question. When the country is sinking under enormous international debt, when more than one hundred million people are living hand to mouth, when we are in grave need of increasing our GDP, when we need to educate millions of young souls, when we need to provide people with the minimal means of shelter, our WISE and ever CARING politicians are stopping the wheel of production by calling HARTAL.

Surface and recycled water seems to be the answer. How will people get it? This will entail gigantic projects costing billions of Taka. More important, this will take time. Even if the government gets down to business in all earnestness, perhaps there is no saving tens of thousands. We haven't been on a worse patch. Ever. O leaders of our citizens, please heed.

Can we afford political unrest?

Sir, We live in a Third World country. The recent food has done much damage adding to the misery of our people, and we are struggling to come out of the clutches of these problems.

On the eve of the twenty-first century, we are struggling to keep up with the rest of the world. We still have a long way to go. In this situation, can we afford hartals and other political disturbances? Is this the time for all this? Isn't there a way to solve the political problems peacefully, or is it too much to ask? We all know the effects of such disturbances on each and every sector of our economy.

My appeal to the opposition is that please, we have had enough! Maybe not for your-

BTV, the poor thing!

Sir, This is as a genuine 'neutral citizen', in response to the recent programmes viewed on BTV. Surely it is, as it always has been, a government-owned organisation, yet the exploitation of this particular media has not been made more efficiently ever before!

BTV is trying to brainwash the new generation about politics. If the truth is really worthy enough (the one they are talking about), then it will be known anyway. It does not need the help of alluring songs and programmes in order to be known and hence, believed.

Where have all the women speakers gone?

Sir, This is about the seminar "New Horizon in the Tele Media", which I attended and found very interesting indeed. I would like to thank Mr Anam and other speakers: Dr Anisur Rahman, Md Jahangir, Mr Afzal Hossain and Mr Jewel Aich for coming to discuss several issues on the media.

Now, I have one great concern. While having these types of seminars it is important to see that among the speakers, there usually are some "women". But among the five speakers during this seminar, none was a woman. What was the reason behind it? Is it that we don't want women to come as speakers or is it that women usually don't show interest to come and play a dominant role

The great BR

Sir, May I request our PM to utilise the services of our Railway for visiting one or two

I write with reference to the article, "Democracy demands ...", in the 11 Nov issue of The Daily Star. Much as I enjoy the paper, I must disagree with the basic and contentious premise of the article that the government is to be held responsible for the opposition's calling of the 60-hour hartal.

In its editorial on 10 Nov, The Daily Star has rightly condemned the use of hartals no matter what the reason (in fact, the time may have arrived for Bangladesh's lawmakers to consider placing legal barriers to the indiscriminate use of this ugly political weapon). In your article of 11 Nov, however, you have created grounds for justifying the calling of the hartal by the opposition BNP. The analysis of the events of 7 November leads to, what appears to me, a foregone conclusion of The Daily Star's — the government and the AL are oppressing the BNP. The DS should appreciate that this cannot be proved in a day or two and presented to the public as a truth.

It is possible that the AL provoked the situation, but it is also equally possible (as appears to many an observer) that the BNP engineered the crisis, as they have done on quite a few previous occasions. By trying to apportion blame for the events of 7 November so soon after the event, is The Daily Star not treading on dangerous ground? Would it not be more prudent to arrive at such serious conclusions after a more thorough examination of what happened on the 7th?

places. I cannot think of any better idea than this to draw the attention of any responsible person associated with our Railway Department. They are all on leave! Otherwise, a person with slightest sense of duty could see what mismanagement and senselessness is going around.

The railway stations are filthy and diseased, the trains are filled up with beggars, vendors and every else other than railway employees. All time tables are dead. Trains often stop nowhere in the middle. The free-ride passengers and the smugglers have comfortable entry and exit. The entire journey is nothing but an agony.

I guess the answer is — it is nobody's baby.

Power failure at hospitals

Sir, Recently I went to the Holy Family Hospital to visit a patient who has been there for some time. He was complaining that during the DESA power failure the patients suffer a lot at the hospital does not have a generator to take care of such situations. Therefore, I draw the attention of the hospital authorities to arrange for a generator to give relief to the patients who are as it is suffering from different ailments.

What's the point?

Sir, When Mr Shailesh Kumar traces the origins of the psyche of communalism in the subcontinent in his book "History of Communal Riots", he is totally at tune with what the common people understand by it. It is like late Mrs Gandhis' exuberance on one of Mr Md Rafi's songs when she eulogised "I am certain, the whole Indian nation has sung this song along with the singer."

But alas, shall we not try to look into something which is much deeper but lies in the shade? What sense is there of somebody's belonging to the religious majority or minority, if he does not have education, job,

freely, make provocative statements openly and frequently, write in newspapers without any hindrance, say whatever they like in Parliament (whenever they do bother to attend) — so how does one make a sweeping statement that the opposition is being oppressed. This begins to sound like what one has been hearing for over two decades, that the AL are by nature oppressive and fascist, and I am sure that the DS does not belong to that

misled with the killers of the Liberation War.

Under the shield of "shad-haron khoma" I have seen the killers of '71 walk freely just as Col. Rashid or Col. Farouque did. At least Hasina could use her power to bring her father's killers to trial but there remains millions of Bangladeshis who do not have the ability to do so because of that "shad-haron khoma" (General Amnesty).

History repeats itself. It was even more painful when our father of the nation compromised by many to have performed transparently and openly in government, much more so than the predecessor BNP regime.

Further, the BNP in opposition has been extremely aggressive on the streets, and elements of their party workers have not missed the opportunity to behave in a violent and criminal manner, forcing the authorities rightly to arrest and bring charges against some of their BNP leaders move about

daily — this is completely wrong. This amount of loadshedding occurs for the whole country, which is not under the jurisdiction of DESA, not just in Dhaka alone.

Recall that DESA is Dhaka Electric Supply Authority and is responsible for only the Dhaka city and some adjoining areas.

Quoting "Two rates of tariff for domestic consumers for peak and off-peak hours may be introduced." You see, it is the domestic users who define the peak hour. It is the numerous residents who, when they switch on millions of lights and fans, make the peak load. Isn't it a mockery to charge them with peak and off-peak rates? How can one expect that a huge number of residents will not switch their appliances on and go for a complete black-out? By the way, do those IR students know the extra cost involved in replacing the whole domestic meters with digital one that counts time to measure peak and off-peak power?

Nevertheless the recommendations put forward by the writers are worth praising. The very name of the article is somewhat vague. Of course it is a personal choice. The definition of loadshedding given at the start of the article is a very good one.

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confessed killers were rewarded by being given diplomatic postings. As recently as Feb 1996, Khaleda Zia allowed former Col Rashid to contest a seat on a BNP ticket and had that parliament convened, he would have played a prominent role in the BNP. Since 1996, while the BNP has not officially opposed the trial, there have been a number of instances where senior BNP leaders have made very controversial and provocative remarks.

As reported by a leading English daily on 6 November, Khaleda Zia made a statement that it was because of Ziaur Rahman that the country gained independence (there was no mention of Sheikh Mujib, and she called AL leaders "cowards" for crossing over to India) and because of the events of 1972-75, the "changeover in 1975 became inevitable". These kinds of remarks are viewed as somehow justifying the events of August 1975 and are further perceived as proof of the BNP's aversion to the trial and verdict on Sheikh Mujib's assassination. Which is why many anticipated that there would be trouble at the BNP's meet on 7 November and it would be used to call for hartals after the verdicts of 8 November.

Given these facts, it is difficult to arrive at conclusions such as those drawn up by the DS regarding the oppression of the BNP or that the present hartal has no bearing on the verdicts of 8 November.

Are the displaced Palestinians expected to celebrate this victory? Is this sufficient incentive for them to remain grateful to Israel and the international community? What a strange international order has come to pass when the lone super-power finds itself helpless to extract justice and reciprocity from a tiny but intransigent State. And the collective will of the member-states of the UN is ignored with unconcealed contempt.

Dr M Zakir Husain

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Good work, champs!

Sir, I am very happy that the South African cricket team has won the Willis World Cup cricket. After many years the South African team has won such an international victory and as a supporter of SA, I express my profound relief at their victory. I hope that the team emerges as a very formidable contender in the World Cup '99.

Adib Reza

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toilet, security and a house? We live in a society where more than 20 million people have no defined toilet, where about the same number goes without a job and have no access to safe drinking water. More than 10 million men and women pass their nights on berry-dams, platforms, by drains, pipes, in abandoned wagons, etc. Every day more and more people are being beaten and exploited by the police. Millions are inhaling black smoke sitting in obsolete transports moving in ant's pace due to unimaginable traffic jam.

On a prima facie basis it appears that since there is an overwhelming majority of one religion, they may demand and may do otherwise with the minority. But actually is that so? How many were killed in the hands of co-religionists in 1971? How many have become 'poor' due to exploitation at the hands of co-religionists? How many files in government offices have been impeded for graft money? Is it reasonable to think or is it on record that Rahman has exploited, tortured, shot, insulted or killed only Dilip and not Karim or Israfil in his role of businessman, politician, official, police or terrorist?

So what is the point in believing strongly that it is the difference in religion that is the core of communalism?

Agreement, at last

Sir, The world waited with baited breath. At last after nine days of marathon session, agreement was achieved between the Israel and the Palestinian authorities in Wye River, Maryland, USA.

Yet, on deep reflection and in the historical perspective of the Palestine issue, it has to be said that the Palestinian authority has been squeezed and bludgeoned into accepting less than what they expected and much less than what is legitimately theirs. Once again Israeli stubbornness has paid dividends — it always did in the past. Security guarantees have been procured ironically from those who are under occupation and whose land has been forcibly taken away from them, and who are subjected to constant insecurity. Even more ironically, the ancestral owners of the land are supposed to feel grateful that they have been given another 14.2 per cent of their own land. What a great victory of justice and fairplay!

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