

Floods in Bangladesh

It is Never the Same Old Story

by M Wahiduzzaman

Needless to say that in the last fifty years we have done or not done, foolishly or callously or selfishly, to give free flow to floodwaters in Bangladesh, it has now become absolutely essential for us to mend our past wrong actions and inaction in all areas. We may ignore this imperative only by ignoring, again knowingly or unknowingly or callously, what consequences such action or inaction would have for us.

FOR a proper understanding of floods in Bangladesh we should make a distinction between the two expressions: (1) floods are natural phenomena in Bangladesh and (2) Bangladesh is a flood-prone country.

The first expression is quite clear. It simply means that one should not be surprised if floods visit Bangladesh because it is only natural. And if so, it further means that we should always be prepared, not only to face floods but also take all measures to control floods — floods meaning destruction of property and loss of lives.

The second expression — Bangladesh is a flood-prone country — has a certain amount of susceptibility in it giving one the feeling that when floods visit Bangladesh, people there do not take them as natural phenomenon. Floods are taken as coming from unkind nature. Thus the second expression may be taken as an exception. For example, it may be said that Mr. Asif is prone to fall asleep on long journeys while many others are not. So, the second expression may be discarded because nature always takes its own course — never and nowhere is it unkind.

Keeping the above explained two conceptions of floods in mind we may proceed to explain the causes and measures that we should take to control floods in Bangladesh. The floods in Bangladesh are caused by the following factors: (1) Bangladesh is a deltaic land situated just about fifteen feet above the sea level; (2) Bangladesh has a small geographical area; (3) Bangladesh accepts the huge volume of the Himalayan ice-melt waters flowing through the rivers upstream in the neighbouring countries; (4) the rivers of Bangladesh are not deep enough, and are becoming more

less developed than Bangladesh of 1987 and 1988. More or less the same is true of Bangladesh of 1988 and Bangladesh of 1998. This only indicates that all development programmes should be implemented with adequate protection of development results.

The above statistics indicate only the quantitative side of the flood losses but these losses have also a qualitative side. The agricultural losses can be recouped much more quickly than industrial losses. Crops lost are definitely a loss forever, but crops can be grown again as soon as the floods recede because the floods do not damage the land. Rather they make the land more fertile. Quite often the floods are followed by bumper growth of crops. But industrial losses cannot be recouped (at least by Bangladesh) immediately after the recession of the floods because the industrial losses mean damage to the industrial installation.

Total flood losses of 1998 has so far been estimated at \$4.3b by the government. The government has also released ministry-wise preliminary losses and requirement for recouping of those losses. Even if those statistics are on the higher side, they enable us to make our own ideas of flood losses and take steps to avoid incurring such losses, particularly in industrial undertakings.

In this connection, it may be mentioned that in the agricultural sector probably much cannot be done individually to take flood control measures. Taking flood control measures for the protection of agricultural produce will mean taking projects like embankments, excavation of canals, dredging of rivers. These are big projects and can be undertaken by the

Tribute to Syed Badrudduja

by Raisuddin Khondoker

IT is a day, just a day. And yet, November 18 is a day pregnant with thoughts of what could have been, had it not. Twenty-four years ago, caused the sun to set in the life of a man who meant so much to the Muslims of India. In the passing of Syed Badrudduja, his people — call them adherents if you will — lost more than a corporeal being. For Syed Badrudduja, in the state of politics, transcended the political, and informed his fellow Muslims that glory was to be had in a combination of principles and a consciousness of reality. He brought the erudite into play, and with that came the naturally eloquent.

When the sun set the Syed Badrudduja's life on November 18, 1974, it was the coming of twilight in the career of a man who had, in humility and yet with grit, struggled all his life for a people he felt deserved a better place under the sun. Today, it is time — from the vantage point of history — to observe the beginning, the always faithful in God, Badrudduja never hesitated to call a spade a spade even in the teeth of violent opposition. In 1958, he refused to sign a document which claimed

taji Shabbir Chandra Bose and the Muslim Leaguers formed only a few days earlier. When Netaji demanded an unconditional apology, the councillor unwisely stated that he had done nothing wrong and that he was apologising only at the request of his friends. The situation was grave, the atmosphere absolutely combustible. Badrudduja rose to the occasion and defused the tension through his inimitable eloquence. He not only opposed the nefarious remark tooth and nail but also pointed out that no true follower of the holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) could ever encourage or tolerate any attempt at maligning the great and noble celebrities of other religions. The historic speech was powerful enough to force the councillor to tender an unconditional apology. Netaji himself along with Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy and Naresh Nath Mukherjee thanked Badrudduja and paid a glowing tribute to his courageous and noble effort.

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An orator of the first order, Syed Badrudduja is remembered in every nook and corner of this subcontinent for his scintillating, matchless command of eloquence in Urdu, Bengali and English. He could breathe fire, when the occasion demanded, like an avenging angel, and warble, when the mood seized him, like a refreshing, sparkling mountain stream.

The treatment of the rebel poet. It was through his sincere solicitude, that the treatment of the great poet progressed unhindered at the Lumbini Park Hospital in Calcutta in the forties. It was also his sincere gestures which brought Abdul Alim to Calcutta for the first time, enabling the bud with the golden voice to bloom into a full blossom. Pallikavi Jasimuddin, then drifting aimlessly, also found a decent footing in life when Badrudduja greeted him with a respectful job. Justice Abdus Sattar, later on the President of Bangladesh, also had the rare privilege of being elevated to the post of the Chief Executive Officer in Calcutta Corporation through the affectionate help of his salt of the earth. No wonder, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself eulogised this dauntless crusader as a "great leader" and very graciously arranged foreign exchange for his last rites (Challishia) in December, 1974.

In 1969, a broad-based committee was formed to pay a befitting tribute to Mirza Asadullah Ghalib, the legendary doyen of Urdu literature, on his 100th Birth Anniversary. The star-studded Ghalib Centenary Committee comprised stalwarts from vari-

ous walks of life like Saïyjid Ray, Dr Subit Kumar Chatterjee, Tarasankar Bandopadhyaya, Prafulla Ghose, Hridaynath Kabir, Vivekananda Mukhopadhyaya, Indrajit Gupta, Ananda Shanker Roy, Hiren Mukherjee and Ashoke Sen. On the joint proposal of Tarashanker Bandopadhyaya and Satyajit Ray, the towering personality of Syed Badrudduja was unanimously chosen to head the prestigious and historic committee.

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Syed Badrudduja took leave of the temporal world, as he had come to it, in all the manifestations since his birth and sufferings. Lucrative and prestigious offers failed to deviate him from the right path. He was offered Central Cabinet Membership, Governorship of West Bengal, and even the coveted post of the president of India through personalities like Bidhan Chandra Roy, Humayun Kabir, Gulzarilal Nanda and Ashoke Sen. But the indomitable crusader preferred to keep his head high and refused to compromise. Worldly possessions he had none, and of hidden treasures there was no trace — for he did not leave any behind.

"Here was a man! When comes another? The Shakespeare is apt, for it explains the life and times of Badrudduja."

Prize Winner's Business Acumen Reaps Harvest

B R Barwale is the winner of this year's World Food Prize, a \$250,000 award considered the Nobel Prize of agriculture, normally given to people who've made research breakthroughs. But Barwale is known more for his marketing savvy than for scientific contributions.

A J Singh writes from Dharamsala

THE World Food Prize has in its 10-year history gone to people who have inspired and changed the lives of people in the developing world by improving the quality, quantity or availability of food.

That's why some are wondering whether this year's winner of the prestigious \$250,000 prize belongs in the same league.

Badrinarayan Ramulal Barwale, nicknamed India's "seed man" is founder-chairman of Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company (Mahyco), the world's largest producer of hybrid cotton seeds and one of India's largest companies.

Mahyco came into existence in the sixties when India had just ushered in the Green Revolution. As foreign multinationals moved into India to capture the seed market, Mahyco stepped in to rival them as India's first private sector seed company.

No one thought it would succeed in the face of the stiff outside competition. However, it thrived thanks to Barwale's business and marketing acumen and his foresight in recognising India's need for a strong seed sector to meet the future demands of its burgeoning population.

"But for Barwale's ability to understand and grab the opportunity 30 years ago, Mahyco wouldn't be what it is today," says Dr S S Dahiya, an eminent scientist at New Delhi's Institute of Agricultural Research (IARI).

His detractors, however, are critical of Mahyco's recent tie-up with Monsanto, the controversial chemical giant. A year ago, Monsanto and Mahyco launched a joint venture to grow genetically-engineered insect-resistant cotton in India.

In the late sixties, IARI developed a hybrid seed called *pusa saavan*, a virus-resistant *okra* seed. The moment he learned of it, Barwale recognised an opportunity to produce and market it on a large scale all over the country. The idea worked.

His big breakthrough came via hybrid cotton seeds developed by CT Patel, a scientist at the government-run Gujarat Agricultural University. When the hybrids hit the market, they became a runaway success and Mahyco hasn't looked back.

"Barwale's marketing savvy helped him succeed where Patel could not as a government scientist," says Navedita Prabhu, a New Delhi-based expert on Indian agriculture.

His business success led him to become chairman of the Jaina People's Co-operative Bank in 1965 and he served on the Bombay's board of the State Bank of India, the country's largest.

Barwale, 67, continues to be the driving force behind Mahyco's success. It produces and markets more than 300 hybrid seed varieties of rice, wheat, corn, and sorghum, as well as oilseeds, fruit and vegetables.

Barwale loves to call himself a farmer and an entrepreneur. Knowing that most Indian farmers are unable to read the instructions on seed bags, he travels to the villages, meets farmers and gives on-the-spot



B.R. Barwale, India's seed science supreme

A Pest of a Problem

Cross-border trade in hazardous chemicals and pesticides threaten the ecology with dire consequences. Sixty-one nations get together to ward off the threat, especially in developing countries which lack resources to tackle this lethal problem.

by Achila Imchen

INTERNATIONAL trade in unwanted hazardous chemicals and pesticides is now a serious global concern, especially in developing countries that lack resources to monitor the pesticides' safe application, storage facilities, and adequate training for their applications. To deal with this, 60 countries have signed a new convention to prevent trade in hazardous chemicals.

Two years after negotiations began under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade was signed in Rotterdam in September, 1998.

In a world where 1,500 chemicals are introduced every year, developing countries have little control over which chemicals cross their borders and cause environmental and health hazards.

In 1996, the FAO published the results of a survey examining the extent to which governments, industries, pesticide users were sticking to guidelines established in 1985. Only 25 of the 74 countries responding to the survey were collecting statistics on pesticide import, local formulation and use. Shockingly, 89 per cent of developing countries stated that they have not studied or have only partly studied the environmental effects of pesticides.

The PIC convention covers 22 pesticides and five industrial chemicals. For a chemical to make it to the PIC list, it should be banned or severely restricted in at least two countries. The convention will not stop production of hazardous chemicals across the world. It is just a mechanism to manage chemicals in a more sustainable manner.

Industrialised countries are the major exporters of banned pesticides to developing countries. According to *Global Pesticide Campaigner*, in 1995-1996, around 21,026,794 pounds of pesticides, which were banned in the United States, were exported from US ports. The total, which includes never-registered products, represents an average rate of more than 14 tonnes shipped per day.

Produced for export only, the products are not evaluated by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). US exports of never-registered pesticides, at nearly 9.4 million pounds, have increased by 40 per cent from the figures noted in the

three-year period of 1992-1994. The convention is specifically significant for developing countries, many of whom do not have the infrastructure to manage and monitor dangerous chemicals. A Pesticide Action Network (PAN) press release states, "In many African countries, poisoning control centres have not even been established, and collecting information on incidents is virtually impossible."

"The three significant clauses adopted in the convention are: export of a chemical can only take place with the agreement of the importing country; an exporting country planning to ship a chemical banned for domestic use will be legally bound to inform importing country; an exporting country planning to ship a chemical banned for domestic use will be legally bound to inform importing countries about it, prior to the first export and for the first export every year; and, countries will have to make national bans on chemicals known to other signatories, inform each other of the harmful effects of the chemicals prior to shipping, and ensure that labels on chemicals carry adequate information about their risks."

India, who has actively participated in the negotiations for the last two years, has been unable to sign the PIC convention due to procedural delays. It did sign the final act of the convention in Rotterdam, signifying the country's compliance with the text of the treaty. However, the final approval of the cabinet is key to India signing the PIC treaty.

Both Vinod Vaish, special secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MEF), and R R Khan, director of the hazardous substances division, MEF, are of the opinion that this treaty will not have a difficult time getting cabinet approval as there were no major objections raised during the national inter-ministerial discussions.

In fact, a conflict of interests dominated the international decision-making process. Even an official report of the International Institute of Sustainable Development (IISD) states, "While many references were made to the fact that this convention was to benefit developing countries, the main protagonists were the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries."

Khan acknowledged, that though many western countries wanted to come across as the "protectors of the environment

in a big way," their views sometimes conflicted with developing countries. At one point, India, along with some African countries, was an active proponent for a clause on liability which would have provided compensation related to accidents involving chemicals.

Initially the liability clause was featured in the negotiations, but was later dropped. Countries like Canada had objections. They refused to be held liable for the weak infrastructure of an importing country. These demands were "fended off" in the later part of the negotiations.

According to Barbara Dinham of PAN, the UK, during the PIC negotiations, "The Indian position was mixed as it is both an importer and an exporter and should therefore comply with all the requirements of being an exporter. As India is one of the few countries exporting dichlorodiphenyl trichloroethane (DDE), it faced a bit of a dilemma."

"Our over-riding concern is that we are a big exporter of chemicals. We are the 15th in the list of exporters, not only in developing countries but also in the developed countries," admits Khan.

Both Khan and Vaish, however, emphasise that they did not encounter any problems with either the departments of chemicals or agriculture, with whom they worked in conjunction during the negotiating process.

The issue of controlling the trade of a "lucrative" industry, estimated at \$30 billion worldwide in 1996, and of its potential conflict with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) did feature prominently. During the drafting of the text, there were concerns among some delegates that the PIC trade rules might provide a country with a trade disadvantage.

However, the convention clearly attempts to maintain a balance between the PIC and other international agreements such as the WTO. It makes its position clear in the preamble where it states, "Trade and environmental policies should be mutually supportive with a view to achieve sustainable development."

The vital issue of the convention seems to be related to financial assistance for developing countries. According to Vaish, the convention had been documented along with the understanding that developing countries required financial assistance to carry out the PIC procedures in their countries. The issue has not been incorporated into the main body of the treaty.

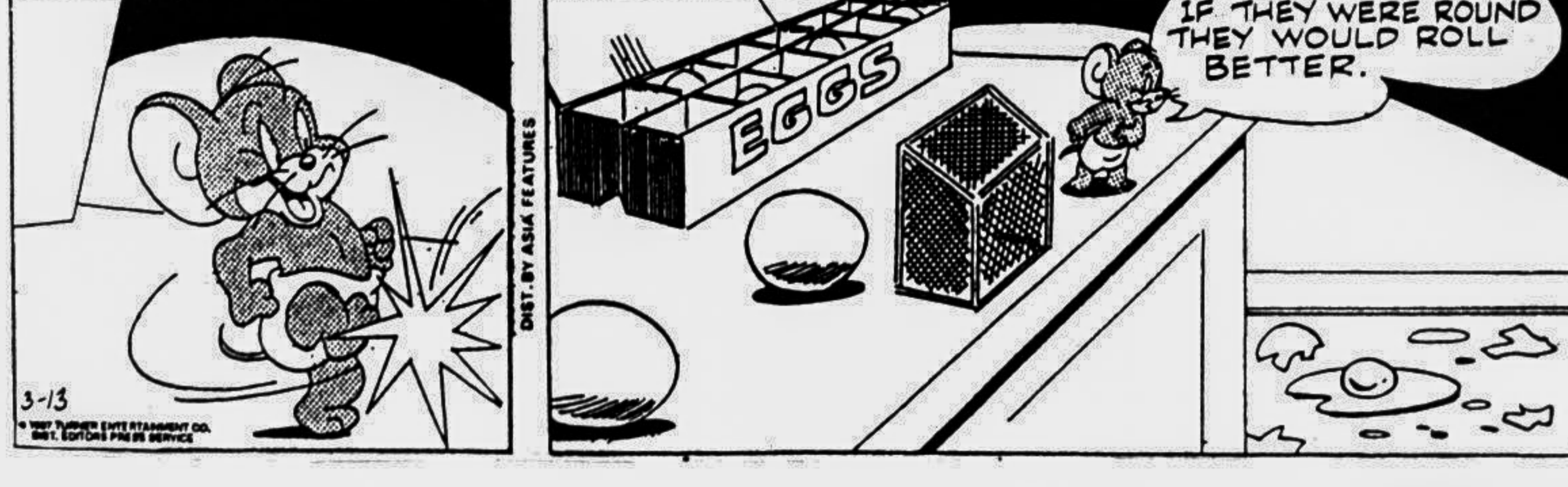
As was pointed out by many African countries, lack of funds would directly affect the capacity of a country to implement the procedures of the convention. Though a provision was made in the text for providing technical assistance by countries with a superior system of chemical management, many developing countries also require money for building testing facilities, mechanisms for safe disposal of obsolete chemicals, and develop risk assessment capabilities.

To be tested as a severely hazardous pesticide on the PIC criteria, a country must compile information of specific incidents related to the use of the chemical, its adverse effects, and the manner in which its formulation was used. It would be hard for a country to comply with the "extremely stringent" criteria, without testing facilities which provide the relevant data, says Khan.

If the convention is to function as a tool to check cross-border trade in dangerous compounds, nothing short of a global cooperation — not only of information exchange, but also of resources — is required.

CSE/Down To Earth Features

TOM & JERRY



Chips, Anyone?

A radical new approach to the timed release of drugs is being patented by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). USA. It uses a silicon microchip etched with thousands of tiny pits, each filled with a dose of the drug to be administered and covered with a thin conductive film that acts as an electrode.

Transistors present on these chips selectively open these reservoirs by feeding a tiny amount of current from a micro-

nuscular battery to the electrodes. These then break down, thereby releasing the drug. The release can be controlled by electric current or the chip by radio signals transmitted from a computer. The chip, which is implanted under the skin, can continue operation for years. MIT says the system is ideal for animals and for patients who forget to take their medicines frequently.

CSE/Down To Earth Features