

Transport Strike

Inter-district commuters have been thrown into a difficult situation by the call for indefinite strike throughout the country made by a section of the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation (BRTWF).

Almost all types of road transport fall within the purview of the strike staged for the realisation of their 11-point demand, that reads so thoroughly against public interest. Accepting the right to strike by any recognised union or association of workers, would be too much to ask whether every means of discussion or negotiation with the authorities concerned were exhausted before calling for such a drastic action that has put hundreds of thousands of passengers into tremendous hardships?

In view of the growing health hazards due to pollution of the two-stroke engine the decision of the authorities to ease out these killers from the roads should have been welcomed by the transport workers as conscious citizens. Rather than resisting the phase-out plan they should have urged the government to replace these machines with more bio-friendly battery-operated three-wheelers.

Driving licences should be issued, both for heavy and light vehicles, after proper investigation and tests, so that they are given to people with sound health and mind. After all no body wants more killers on roads than we already have. The demand for suspension of leasing out ports should not be the cup of tea for BRTWF.

But we are fully sympathetic to their demand for due payment by the authorities when a vehicle is requisitioned. We also strongly support their demand for safety in hill districts and stern action against toll collectors irrespective of their political affiliation or allegiance. But why the strike?

If the BRTWF has submitted any list of demand to the authorities concerned as they claim, then the government should immediately open talks with the BRTWF and solve their problems without delay because another transport workers' federation under the leadership of Awami League MP Wazuddin Khan has threatened to go on 72 hours' strike from December 12.

Accord Anniversary Thoughts

Much as we would have liked the first anniversary of CHT peace accord to pass on a celebrative note, regrettably some discordant voices were heard through the observance programmes of different parties. The redeeming feature though is that the dissent was voiced by the PCJSS on the slow pace of implementation rather than on any content of the peace accord. How much the PCJSS is responsible for the deceleration of the implementation process is something they would have to reflect on before they put the blame squarely on the government. The anniversary is also the right occasion for the government to do some introspection on its tally of failures.

We cannot implement the peace accord fast and thick without the instruments necessary to do it. The hill district council bills already enacted by the parliament are awaiting minor modifications to accommodate certain views of the PCJSS. Unless we get this over with we cannot hold the hill district council elections which are vital to the formation of a truly representative Regional Council, the apex body envisaged in the peace agreement to implement autonomy in the region which was the core demand of the tribal population. The elected office-bearers of the hill district council are to constitute the electoral college for the RC. A nominated interim RC is only an incidental necessity, all our efforts must now be directed towards completing the legislation, setting a date for the hill district council elections and ultimately putting in place the Regional Council.

Meanwhile we should have the Land Commission to sort out the settlement issues on a permanent footing. Since the peace accord has reaffirmed the land rights of the existing plainland settlers in no unmistakable terms, any attempted re-opening of this settled issue would amount to a breach of the accord.

The process of absorption of the 2000 armed Shantibahini cadres who have returned to normality by surrendering their weapons needs to be completed at the soonest.

It is important in the final analysis that the PCJSS sets the tribal house in order.

Of Men and Monkeys

The contentious issue of whether monkeys are our ancestors has no bearing on this piece. We were attracted by a news item published in this paper on Saturday about the escapades of a group of monkeys in the once remote district of Madaripur. We hardly knew that Madaripur is the residence of so many monkeys who have passed hard times for want of food during the recent floods like their more rational human neighbours. In the absence of natural food, the highly intelligent animals took recourse to snatching foods from people and shops. Monkeys have always been a fascinating species, specially for children, a proof of which can always be obtained if we care to observe the crowds in front of monkey cages in any zoological garden.

As many as 2000 monkeys, a very heartening figure indeed, live in 'godowns and abandoned houses' in Madaripur; and as food has become scarce for them they are on the prowl to snatch whatever food they can from the local residents. What can the monkeys do in the absence of VGF cards or FWP or even Test Relief programmes for them? Unfortunately for them they cannot qualify for any of these doles and handouts meant only for human beings. The results are obvious; they are gangling up against humans and trying to survive the hard way. But in doing so they try to preserve their distinct identity as three different groups franchised to operate in three different areas and any overshooting of territory calls for immediate fighting among the Bazar Group, Adamjee Group and Gala Group as the locals named them. Well, doesn't it remind us of similar grouping in some other areas of our society?

How can these monkeys go without food for such a long time in spite of the presence of 'animal-friendly' organised groups?

Water Sharing Treaty with India: Time for a Review

THE agreement on sharing of water of the Ganges between Bangladesh and India was concluded in this month two years ago. The present government of Bangladesh claimed it to be a great achievement for themselves and called it a milestone in the process of improvement of bilateral relations between the two countries. The opposition political parties termed it to be an unequal treaty, which sacrificed national interests of Bangladesh. They went so far as to describe it as a sell-out to India.

The government emphasised the point that the successive governments since 1975 have not been able to conclude a long term agreement with India on this issue, which is vital to the national interests of the people of Bangladesh as much as more than one-third of the territory of their land remains dependent on the availability and use of the water of the Ganges for its best utilisation through irrigation. It represented a singular credit to them to achieve this feat.

The BNP contends that the only Treaty till two years ago on this issue had been concluded by the BNP government of Ziaur Rahman. This was an interim agreement valid for five years from 1977 and provided enough waters for Bangladesh with a guaranteed formula on the quantum of water determined on the basis of average flow of waters since 1948. The subsequent govern-

ment of Ershad failed to recognise the dire need for the renewal of this agreement after it lapsed. The situation continued till the entire regime of Ershad for nine years.

During her rule, Khaleda Zia made some efforts to get a just share of the waters, but witnessed too hardened an attitude of India to conclude an agreement. She raised the issue at the United Nations to keep it alive. The contention of the Awami League that she did not discuss the matter with Indian leaders on her visit to India was false, as was evident from the joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit which clearly indicated that the subject had been taken up with the Indian government during the talks.

India appeared to have felt no compulsion to concede even the basic rights and minimum requirements of a lower riparian river, as she could do without it for so long without prohibition. All these years India could and did regulate and even close the tap at her whim, without having to consult Bangladesh on this bilateral matter. India then waited for a friendly government, which is a vassal government in the eyes of the BNP and other opposition parties, to be firmly saddled in power in Bangladesh in order to

settle this issue as a *quid pro quo* for getting an unannounced pledge for subsequent concessions by Bangladesh on various other issues. According to the opposition, these include granting of a corridor through Bangladesh to make easy access to India's troubled eastern states, obtaining of a wider and freer market in Bangladesh through the formation of a re-

favourable terms. It went on saying that India had to mutually agree with Bangladesh to the quantum of water Bangladesh would get without which Farakka barrage would not be commissioned. This was incorporated in the joint declaration issued following the summit meeting between Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Mujib in May 1974. A golden opportunity

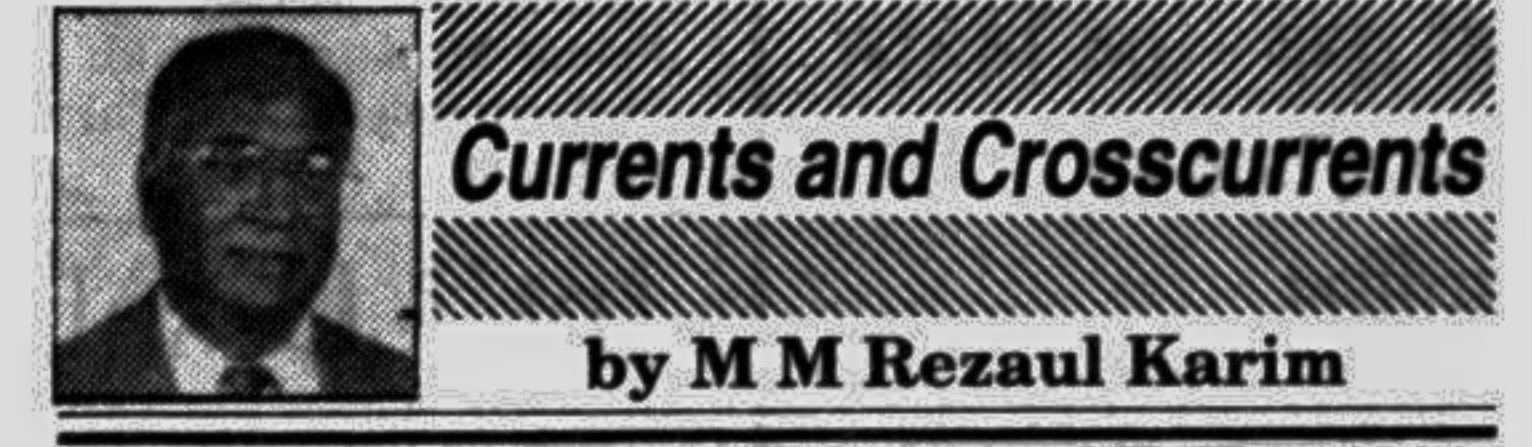
in India. In other words, India would legally be able to divert as much of the Ganges waters as it chose to irrigate Indian territories and could literally leave zero cuses at Farakka to share with Bangladesh. There is no clause that would provide a formula to guarantee a minimum flow of waters for Bangladesh.

Secondly, the absence in the current treaty of a provision for arbitration in the event a dispute arises or an interpretation or clarification is warranted constitutes Achilles' heels for Bangladesh. In the Greek mythology, the invincible hero, Achilles, had the only physical weakness that lay in his heels, which had been taken advantage of fully by his enemy. One is given to understand that in its urge to sign a water treaty, Bangladesh gave up and sacrificed many of its legitimate rights, including the right of arbitration which has formed part of all such treaties on sharing of waters of international rivers in other regions of the world. Gross omission of such an imperative provision has rendered Bangladesh to a position of prostrate, remaining entirely at the mercy of India.

Thirdly, soon after the signing of the current treaty there was a huge shortfall in the

discharge of waters at Farakka. The cause and effect advanced by the government appear to be far from satisfactory to many. It would be in the fitness of things that one has to examine this and various other aspects of the treaty that agitate minds of both the opposition and the ruling party.

Now that the stipulated time has come, as per treaty provisions, both Bangladesh and India should sit together and review the working of the treaty and, in the process, should recommend appropriate measures to rectify flaws and meet shortcomings not only in the implementation of the agreement but also to modify and add some provisions that may be found warranted. This should follow after eliciting public opinion on this issue of great national significance by way of making due study, organising seminars, holding discussions in public fora, etc. Both the governments of Bangladesh and India should make available to the people relevant data and information in order to enable this public discourse a worthwhile exercise, helpful to both the governments charter the course of future action that will be acceptable to all, including the opposition in Bangladesh. In this process, our government must not, however, by-pass the Parliament, as it had done during negotiations and signing of this treaty, and make full use also of the Parliamentary committees for this purpose.



Currents and Crosscurrents by M M Rezaul Karim

gional group and securing terms favourable to India's interests in bringing about a settlement of Chittagong Hill Tracts insurgency.

The Awami League claimed that they had obtained a larger share of water in 1975 while commissioning the Farakka barrage than what the BNP obtained subsequently in the interim agreement. The BNP retorts that the Awami League had miserably failed in its duty without making even a gesture to conclude a treaty on those

was then lost for concluding a just, equitable and permanent solution. The BNP lays the blame totally and squarely on the Awami League for this failure.

The objections of the BNP and other opposition parties to the water sharing treaty now in vogue are many. The principal one lies in the provision of the sharing of waters as these are available in Farakka, without making any restrictions on the consumptive uses of water in the upper reaches of the Ganges

Democracy and Women's Representation in Bangladesh

RECENTLY the Prime Minister, while laying the foundation of a 12-point policy for Jatiya Mahila Sangstha Bhaban on November 30, 1998, stressed on the importance of women's empowerment for our national development as well as strengthening of our nascent democratic order. She is correct in saying so since an operative democracy, not to speak of a successful democracy, is not possible if country's women folks, who constitute 48 per cent of the total population, are not given equal opportunities to make their voices heard and unable to bring any influence on the policy formulation of the government. It is not simply possible to enhance the consolidation of our nascent democratic system without broadening the democratic base, which can happen only with the mainstreaming of women into the system. Have we been able to do so? The answer is a dismal 'no'. So far there have been only rhetoric (and we are very good at it) but no sincere efforts, or commitments, or actions, to bring about a change in the existing electoral system. The system has produced women parliamentarians (from the reserved seats) whose role and effectiveness have nothing but one big disappointment. Thanks to the mode of election (rather selection by the winning party stalwarts) they have basically served as a vote bank for the majority party and remained satisfied by playing a secondary role to their male counter-parts. Till date, there have been only a few women cabinet ministers in the highest decision-making body. So it is quite evident that women's presence are minimal at all spheres of decision-making bodies. As a result, women have not made significant advance from lower levels of professional and corporate ranks into position of power and leadership. The almost insurmountable, impediments of

It must be remembered that we are at the threshold of twenty-first century and women all over the world are making strides in their efforts to have their voices heard. Bangladeshi women also want their voices and demands to be heard and recognized. They don't want to be used as vote bank. They want meaningful representation.

parliament are reserved for women, there is a quota system for women in every cadre of civil service and at the Union Parishad level one-third seats are reserved to be directly elected by the women etc, etc. So what more do we want?

While not disagreeing with the statement that there has been encouraging progress of women's involvement in the political process in the country during the last one and half decade, in reality their ratio is minimal when compared with the vast number of women living in the country. And in spite of increased female participation in the national level elections, the desired goal has still remained a far cry.

In order to mainstream women in the national political power structure, the need of the hour is to thoroughly examine the existing electoral system. The system has produced women parliamentarians (from the reserved seats) whose role and effectiveness have nothing but one big disappointment. Thanks to the mode of election (rather selection by the winning party stalwarts) they have basically served as a vote bank for the majority party and remained satisfied by playing a secondary role to their male counter-parts. Till date, there have been only a few women cabinet ministers in the highest decision-making body. So it is quite evident that women's presence are minimal at all spheres of decision-making bodies. As a result, women have not made significant advance from lower levels of professional and corporate ranks into position of power and leadership. The almost insurmountable, impediments of

women's endeavours to get into national power structure of country are numerous, and I do not want to get into the details of those factors. One big issue which should be taken up immediately is the question of women's representation in the National Parliament and make it effective and meaningful.

The Action Plan adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 - the Government of Bangladesh has ratified, with minor changes in clauses 192, b and d - propagates to 'consider measures in electoral system that encourages political parties to inte-

grate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and levels as men', and 'review the differential impact of electoral systems on the political representation of women in elected bodies and consider where appropriate, the adjustment or reform of these systems.'

The major burden of the responsibility, I am afraid, lies on the shoulder of the political parties alone. Although the major political parties have women's wings, posts of women's affairs secretaries at various tiers of their party organizations and women workers in their central and working committees but their number is insignificant. Moreover, the women's wings work more as a fifth wheel of the party and

have little or no influence on their respective parties' decision-making and policy formulation process.

The parties do not care to nominate those women who worked either at the district or grassroots levels, which usually are the breeding grounds for young, motivated and aspirant women leaders. These leaders are not given any chance to demonstrate their political acumen. I found this out while working in a workshop for the women candidates (not the nominees of the major political parties) who contested the 1991 election but could not get elected. Through my interac-

tions with these women political leaders, their political sagacity, skill, intuitiveness, dedication, willingness and commitments to bring about a societal change, especially with regard to women's issues astounded me. Most of these hard working women could not get elected because they had no party machinery to back them in their electioneering endeavours. So the nature of women's representation remained similar to the previous one. A few women stalwarts were directly elected who were effective but their minuscule number could not create any effective impact. And the thirty women MPs from reserved seats who certainly did not represent any section of the population, not to speak of the women population,

as such, were not much of any help. Obviously, if we do really want to integrate the women into the mainstream politics, isn't it about time that we start healthy debates and prepare meaningful suggestions so that women's representation becomes really effective and replace the present constitutional provision, which has utterly been ineffective in representing women and would expire in 2000 AD? Here is an area where state intervention is a must and if necessary there should be constitutional provision so that the parties are bound to take steps to improve women's peripheral situation in the political arena. A number of steps can be taken to alleviate the situation such as making mandatory provisions for all political parties to reserve 10 per cent nominations for the women. Such mandatory provisions exist in Nepal where every political party is bound to keep 5 per cent of the nomination reserved for women. Such arrangement may not be enough as male politicians are not keen enough to make sure that women are given nominations in those constituencies where the chances of winning is indeed precarious. Nonetheless it is a right step in the right direction.

The point is, even in the developed democracies the electoral system is constantly under scrutiny so that there is effective representation of all segments of the society so that no special or interest group is able to take advantage of it and thereby misuse it. Given that criterion the question naturally arises as to why the major political parties are silent on this issue. How do the interests of the major political par-

ties serve under the present electoral system for women's representation? The answer is quite obvious. It has been mentioned earlier: Both parties want to use the thirty reserved seats for women as vote bank. We may recollect in this connection how both BNP in 1991 and the Awami League in 1996 managed to get the required majority to form the government.

Isn't it then obvious why the major political parties maintain such ominous silence on the issue? And why does not the Prime Minister while presenting the list of revolutionary steps taken for women's empowerment talk about much needed electoral reforms so that the women are properly represented in the Parliament and in the decision-making process? Does it not then erode the credibility of our leadership's commitments toward women's political empowerment?

It must be remembered that we are at the threshold of twenty-first century and women all over the world are making strides in their efforts to have their voices heard. We, the Bangladeshi women, also want our voices and demands to be heard and recognized. We don't want to be used as vote bank. We want meaningful representation. A national debate on the issue should ensue as soon as possible. Hopefully, the leaders of our country would lead us to a world characterized by equality, development and peace and would not be indifferent to our most vital need, i.e. ensuring direct political empowerment of the women so that we can take part in our national development. Mere awareness and campaigning for political parties, which are in no way less significant, is not enough to fulfill our potentials.

We must become effective legislators, cabinet ministers and formulate policies so that we can shape our own destinies and our own future.



PANORAMA Dilara Choughury

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.

Ailing Asma

Sir, With reference to the DS news on ailing Asma Begum who is in critical condition at DMCH, there are a number of things that I'd like to mention. Is there no end to our misery? How can a doctor "accidentally" remove a human organ, be it a kidney or any other vital organ of the body? All the ministers seem to make meaningless promises as was the case with little Runa. After the headlines had died, the so-called assurance of help also seem to have disappeared. Not only are we left to mis-trust our so-called law enforcement system but also we cannot even trust the doctors with our life! What are we supposed to do then? Go for treatment to them and end up in our deathbed!

The prime minister has decided to set up a Human Rights Commission in the Jatiya Sangsad. But for what purpose, so that they have something new to argue about? Asma today is just another victim of our inefficient system - it makes us wonder: is our life so worthless that it has no right to be lived or are we just victims of the system?

Zeenat Zaman Independent University, Bangladesh

Hart (AL)

Sir, When Sheikh Hasina says that Awami League would never resort to hartal, I am really not sure about their sincerity. Because past does not tell us that. What did happen to the announcement during the Er-

shad regime when she told at a Chittagong public meeting that whoever goes to election under Ershad is 'National Traitor'. The next thing we saw Awami League joined the elections. And this participation in election prolonged Ershad rule and gave rise to unrest and political violence. I, as a student, lost two years of academic life due to this.

There are a lot of examples of the same promises. What happened to their promise of giving autonomy of state-owned media? So when you are in opposition you will do one thing and while in government you will do different, cannot be the norm of political behaviour.

Md Shams Dallas, Texas

The third force

Sir, News reports from New Delhi indicate that a third force is being organised in Indian politics to unite the Muslim votes to fight against pseudo secular and Hindu communal politics.

Who are the major players behind these scenes? Further balkanisation of the Indian sub-continent to suit western interests? Not unlikely, judging from past patterns. The economic clout of India must be contained operating under the non-transparent WTO, as South and the Central Asia are the richest markets during the next century (recent BBC radio documentary on Turkmenistan sitting over the world's fourth largest natural reserves of energy fossil).

Footholds must be established early, now that Moscow has been made impotent, and

Japan is poor in international politics, and some self-cleaning exercises have been imposed on the nation walling with the yen trouble, as her yin and yang have gone wrong. Bangladesh is already a target for western base, and her politicians are busy with in-fighting.

US VP Al Gore gored Malaysian national sentiments with his T-shirt diplomatic tactlessness (why did this gentleman walk out of the dinner in his honour?). He was sent to spy on it and thrust a spanner into the spokes at the right moments.

US does not like powerful rulers in the third world (remembering Castro and what they did to a Central American president). She welcomed the fall of Suharto, and is openly out to bring down Saddam. Mahathir suspects the US might be using Anwar Ibrahim indirectly to get a hold on defiant Malaysia, after Mahathir, years ago twisted the British lion's tail, forcing Thatcher to fly out of KL on an humble pilgrimage.

The West is seeking new pastures in the Asian continent, and weak regimes are in for doses and antidotes. How is the Dhaka regime bracing itself for the overtures, noting in the background the case in the court on alleged undisclosed contracts or deals with the foreign gas companies?

Senior foreign diplomats have started a shuttle service to bring down the heat between the two major political parties, one walling with *tauba* from further hartals (the second *tauba* from the mighty party), and the other threatening non-stop hartals as and when needed.

The foreign powers like stooge regimes to dispense conditional favours. More Monica asexual missiles are being programmed in many parts of the world. My 5-year old niece is happy with the imaginary image of Santa

Claus' bringing her gifts via her *chachas, mammas and khaloos*. The Muslim fundamentals here will certainly be exploited to gain vested interests by un-wanted groups including foreign, vide persistent reports in a section of the local press, and tacit official knowledge that some foreign international terrorist organisations are beginning to focus attention on Bangladesh.

A Husnain Dhaka

Arrear telephone bills

Sir, In reply to a question by an MP the Telephone and Telecommunications Minister recently stated on the floor of the House that the total amount of arrear telephone bills is now around Tk 450 crores and that, of this amount, about Tk 3 crores are owed by the past and present members of the parliament.

Such a large amount owed by MPs could not have accumulated overnight. The conclusion, therefore, is that the arrears were deliberately allowed to accumulate over the years. As a subscriber, my own telephone line is liable to be disconnected unless I pay up my bills within a stipulated time and the T&T applies this rule rigorously to all subscribers. May I ask the hon'ble minister under what rules and special provisions of any laws the telephone lines of defaulting MPs have not yet been disconnected?

A Quayyum Gulshan, Dhaka

T&T and analogue hassle

Sir, My analogue phone under Sher-e-Bangla Exchange went out of order for at least seven long spells in last two years. It is dead now. I am fed up with these routine hassles and have given up

lodging complaints, which normally go unheeded on the set-pleas of various technical limitations of T&T department. A large number of analogue subscribers, bearing startling digits of 32, under dilapidated analogue exchange of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar are bearing untold sufferings for last two years without any apparent remedy.

T&T should take immediate measure to convert these remaining analogue numbers into digital and save us from regular sufferings.

Shamsul Huda 8/13 Block-C Lalmatia

Curbing political violence

Sir, The newspapers carry news items daily on arrests of politicians or political workers indulging in violence, law and order situations and open gunmanship. Such news items have to be polarised as, naturally, fewer politicians of the ruling party are detained than those belonging to the opposition. The situation becomes sensitive before by-elections. Nobody is happy, and the voters are fed up with the culture of violence practised by the political parties (of course no party will acknowledge). So we fall back on a tested formula: you are judged by the company you keep.

Normal, peaceful politics cannot be expected when politics is controlled using violent means, directly or indirectly. Finding solutions based on violence is a dangerous trend in any society. The same set of political leaders have to find the peaceful solutions (we come back to the basic war-and-peace theory).

It is beating about the bush, but, as things come out of the bush, do we get any sense out of during a shikar operation, as we read in the hunters' books. Now both the hunters and the hunted are politicians! Which third party would like to meddle in

this game? On the other hand, meddling will not be allowed!

Comments by political leaders have not provided the solution so far. When do we approach for redress? What is this *janata bichar*? Next election, under caretaker government? Funny business, the politicians cannot rule themselves, and wish to rule (or serve) 120 million!

Millions come cheap! Abul M Ahmad Dhaka

Agri-insurance

Sir, Agricultural insurance is aimed at providing protection to investments in crop production, livestock rearing and various other farm-related activities through identification of possible losses against natural calamities plus other insurable perils. Agricultural insurance programmes have been successfully implemented in different countries.

In the context of Bangladesh, agricultural insurance can effectively contribute to increase the productivity in agriculture through encouraging farmers to take investment risks as well as to ensure maximum protection of their crops. It can also ensure sustainable agriculture and development. Of course determining which model for agricultural insurance is appropriate in Bangladesh needs research and action-trial. In order to initiate such research, we need sound knowledge on agricultural insurance has to be gathered by the agronomists.

So, agricultural insurance chapter should be incorporated in the curriculum of Bangladesh Agricultural University and other universities. At the same time the government may undertake a project to try and examine the effectiveness of agricultural insurance system in the country.

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