

Push Needed to Health Projects

The World Bank consortium aided new health and population sector programmes considered pivotal to a huge qualitative difference in the service delivery system are suffering from a slow-down in implementation. Exposing our own dearth of monitoring it has had to be a World Bank review revealing the sorry state of affairs in an area which, needless to say, is crucial to human resource development in the country. While apparently managing to quickly unlearn the lessons from 50 per cent project underperformance among 66 WB consortium aided projects undertaken during the past five years, we are now plodding it out with the fourth population and health project (FPHP).

The last-named multi-million dollar project has hit quite a few snags, but these can be conveniently put under a single rubric — lack of management strategy with a vision. The WB review mission in its assessment of individual projects highlighted fundamental policy and institutional defects that made management and implementation of projects extremely difficult. For instance, appointment of staff was delayed slowing down not merely implementation but also reducing the effectiveness of the project when it came to gestate. On top of the personnel placement delays, projects would remain unmanned with frequent transfers of key incumbents as replacements took their time to be in place. The ministry of health and population control cannot be blindfolded to the adverse impact such sudden departure of important officials from projects make on the pace of their implementation. Even in administration such frequent changes are regarded as unwelcome disruptions, let alone in project management and implementation where single-handed driving and piloting can make all the difference between success and failure.

This vital aspect of handling projects should be accorded the importance of an implementation policy rather than be treated as part of the so-called conventional personnel policy. If necessary, a capacity enhancement project ought to be specifically undertaken to have a new breed of dynamic project managers in place. In this context, the World Bank recommended personnel tracking system seems worthy of immediate introduction. Spot those who have returned from abroad with specialisation in the field and harness their new skill immediately. This could then form part of an extended strategy for the creation of a post of reservists going well into the future.

A minimum three-year engagement of key officials in a project coupled with delegation of powers to them can step up implementation by leaps.

Biman's Plight

Bangladesh Biman, the national airlines, is not exactly a world beater when it comes to operational efficiency or service. The airline's management has been little short of atrocious. Even then, a recent audit report which catalogued instances of corruption and mismanagement in the airline, has come as a shock. There is one observation in the report which cannot but raise eyebrows. The report has found Biman's Dhaka-London and Dhaka-New York flights to be highly loss-making, termed them "prestige routes", and suggested that these flights be stopped. The auditor's suggestion is rather mind-boggling, but Biman's non-performance on these routes is what warrants explanation.

Given the high concentration of Bangladeshi expatriates in London and New York, one would expect Biman to earn a handsome operating profit on these routes, even if it struggles on others. More importantly, this solid base of potential customers should have enabled Biman to build more business, by appealing to a wider clientele. In other words, people would have been justified in wanting to see additional flights on these routes, and not a discontinuation of existing flights. The auditor's observation, therefore, compels the public to wonder how Biman has managed to turn these geese with the potential to lay golden eggs into virtual dead ducks.

It may be mentioned here that airlines such as Emirates, Singapore Airlines and more recently Gulf Air, have expanded their operations far and wide on the basis of efficiency and service both on the ground and in the air. They did not have to rely on "ethnic" passengers. Biman has this advantage in its Dhaka-London and Dhaka-New York flights. Yet, it is losing even Bangladeshi passengers to other airlines. The public have a right to demand an explanation from Biman, and the government has a duty to drastically reform the airline's management and cut costs through manpower reduction. Biman has no right to hand over these potentially lucrative routes to other airlines through its inefficiency and mismanagement.

Habits Die Hard

Volunteering information can be dangerous at times. The Dhaka City Corporation engineering department should not have perhaps requested the Traffic department for the 'unhindered plying of the sludge carrying trucks' from Dhanmandi lake to Joar Sahara. Some in the Traffic department sniffed something as seems evident from their reply to the oblique allegation saying, 'accordingly, we have notified all our personnel on roads to give priority to the trucks working at Dhanmandi lake site'. The sludge carrying trucks were apparently stopped at different points on their route to the dumping ground at Joar Sahara asking for extra money.

The truckers, some thirty in number, have stopped work in protest. The truck drivers alleged that the police sergeants have asked for two types of payment — a regular fee of three hundred taka per day per truck as long as the vehicles are engaged in this work and spot payment for the retrieval of the impounded papers of the vehicles and their drivers in lieu of one thousand taka per case. And all approach roads to the dumping ground are so skillfully guarded that these roads have become turnpikes. Few trucks can pass certain points without being stopped by the traffic sergeant and the driver harassed. But they were quite lenient on the drivers as the police did not file any case against them but asked for only one thousand taka for the return of the papers. Perhaps this is not the first instance of such highhandedness by the keepers of law and order. There are honest officers to be sure, but they are an increasingly endangered species. The Daily Star report of Monday also says that police officials denied their knowledge of such wrongdoing by their staff though the DCC people informed police of the allegations. Habits die hard, don't they?

Bangs Don't Help, Performance Does

The best course for the BJP is to quit government and sit in the opposition. Not because it has lost in all four states, but because it will send the message that the party respects even the semblance of people's anger to its governance. Its stock is bound to go up.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

EVEN after the defeat in its stronghold, the three Hindi-speaking states in the North — Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan — the Bharatiya Janata Party is not facing the facts. The price rise or lapses in the administration are important factors. They have aggravated the situation. But they do not constitute the situation.

The truth is that the party has lost its sheen — and appeal to the voters. The image it has tried to project has been on the basis of two points. One, given a chance, it would do better because it is the party with a difference. Two, *Hindutva* is India's ethos and the party will push the country towards that. Whatever its rhetoric, the BJP's image has received a battering on both counts.

The BJP-led government at the Centre or the party's governments in the states have turned out to be no different from the ones, which had ruled earlier. The administration has stayed as corrupt as before and even ministers have not withdrawn their hands from the till. The party has been as much at home with smugglers, tax-evaders and criminals as was Congress or the Janata Dal.

One BJP parliament member was so upset before elections that he wrote to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Home Minister L. K. Advani that if they could join hands with AIADMK Chief Jayalalitha, why were they critical of former Bihar chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, involved in the fodder scam? At one of the BJP's national meetings, some weeks ago, a few members admitted before the leadership that their rule was no better than that of Congress or the Janata Dal.

If the voters have felt the same way, why should the BJP be surprised over the result? In fact, people believe that the party has let them down. Not that they have forgotten the malfunctioning of Congress, but they were expecting purposeful and positive governance, particularly when the BJP battled at the Centre for the first time. (Its 13 days in 1996

were only an interlude.) Finding that the BJP is no different than others, they have turned back to Congress in the hope that it has improved in the wilderness. The near return of the backward and the Dalits, once the Congress vote bank, has been crucial.

The point of the *Hindutva* ethos has hurt the BJP in two ways. Liberals have distanced themselves from the party more markedly. On the other hand, the staunch Hindus have got alienated because they have found the party compromising on its agenda for the sake of power. It took no time to set aside the three objectives — the demolition of mosques at Mathura and Varanasi, the building of Ram temple at the site of the demolished Babri masjid and the deletion of Article 370 to confer special status on Jammu and Kashmir — when the party found that some constituents were willing to support the BJP coalition.

The party has two options before it. One, it can become more stringent and more fanatic. But this may cost it the support of some of the 13 constituents, which sustain the shaky coalition. Moreover, if any lesson is to be drawn from the results, it is that the tide of communalism is receding. Delhi and Rajasthan, where the BJP has been routed, have a preponderant majority of Hindus. The committed RSS cadre is active. Rajasthan does not have many Muslims. So is the case of Madhya Pradesh. In Delhi, the Muslim population is confined to a handful of constituencies. It is really the Hindu community, which has turned its back on the BJP. Will becoming more Hindu help BJP?

The other option before the party is to eschew communal-

ism. It cannot come to power on its own if it does not make up with the 120 million Muslims. Can it secularise its credentials, which are Hindu at present? It is not an easy decision to make because the very growth of the party is on the basis of Hinduising the waters of politics. And how can BJP dare to leave the RSS parivar, which sustains it?

The best course for the BJP is to quit government and sit in the opposition. Not because it has lost in all four states, but because it will send the message that the party respects even the semblance of people's anger to its governance. Its stock is bound to go up. In fact, the BJP should not have formed government in the first instance. It should have asked the nation to return it with a clear majority. After having tried all political parties, they voters would have had no option to but come to it. Even in the last Lok Sabha election, one slogan that helped the BJP was, "Give us a chance."

The party has lost the opportunity because it has been found out. The explanation that it was given only seven to eight months does not wash. It is the ineptness of the government that has annoyed the voters the most. How to charter its new policy will be the biggest task before the BJP.

However, the dilemma of Congress is a different one. Sonia Gandhi wants the Vajpayee government to go but hesitates to let her party step in. Somehow, she has come to believe that Congress has only to wait and power will automatically fall on its lap. Statistically, Congress has done well. In the 1993 assembly elections, Congress won 281 seats in the four states against the 261 of the BJP. In the 1996 Lok Sabha election, the assembly segments reduced Congress to 241 and

The Never-ending Crisis

After the beating that Saddam is receiving it would seem that he would have no stomach to build weapons of any kind. In any case the whipping of Saddam cannot be lost on her Arab neighbours.

THE crisis that erupted in the Middle East with Iraqi invasion of Iran almost 20 years ago, struck no sign of ending any time soon. The war was back in 1979 when Iran was emerging from a long and violent battle between the Shah and his adversaries. The Shah fled the country. The rest is history. Taking advantage of the difficulties faced by the new regime in Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iraq, no doubt encouraged by his Arab brethren, struck across the western border of Iran and made some spectacular gains. Iran was not ready for this kind of realpolitik, from her neighbour sharing the same faith. It was all the more painful for Iran for the country was awash with Islamic fervour.

Iran did not take long to strike back and recover the lost territory. A see-saw battle erupted the net result of which was death and destruction at a colossal scale. Iraq had the supremacy in the air and her war effort was virtually bankrolled by her Arab brethren. Iran had depth in her territory and in absolute terms

was much stronger.

This fratricidal war immediately drew the attention of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), who volunteered to mediate. At that particular moment an OIC Summit was being held in Makkah al Mukarramah. The deliberations began in front of the Holy Kaaba. This was the largest assembly of Islamic Heads of state. As the Assistant Secretary General in charge of Political Affairs, I was responsible for organising the conference with the help of Saudi Authorities.

The Conference then moved to the cool hills of Taif, north of Makkah al Mukarramah, where a marble city had been built for the Conference. The Conference promptly decided to send Habib Chatti, the Secretary General of the OIC to Tehran to persuade the Iranian authorities not to boycott the Summit. The effort ended in failure as the Foreign Ministers level meeting commenced and I held forth in place of Chatti. The Summit decided to set up an eight member Heads of State Committee including President Ziaur Rahman from Bangladesh.

In record time we prepared papers, had all the vast resources of Saudi Arabia, including a palace, a private jet, for our mediation mission. The next morning we flew to Teheran and then to Baghdad.

From the march of events around Iraq, we hear noises from Washington DC that Saddam should be eliminated. That appears unlikely. The US had a perfect opportunity when her triumphant coalition forces were moving towards Baghdad. After all at present Saddam is no threat to any body. He serves as a handy whipping boy for a superpower.

OPINION

Carrying a Bag of Potatoes

Abu Shahab-ud-Din

Why there is a lack of energy, creativity, and originality in our life today? Why is the cultural scene so lacklustre in Bangladesh now? The answer lies in our confused, and unsettled national question itself. We are now going through the most critical period of our state's basic dilemma. Our national identity is not well-defined yet in order to ignite the general enthusiasm and spirit that presages the birth of a proud member in the comity of world nations. Usually the intelligentsia (the theoretically oriented, professional, creative class) of any nation defines, and lays the foundation to a national culture. Here, in our case, one half of the intelligentsia still thinks that Bangladesh national culture need not be any different from the ever-beautiful, and original Bengali culture, the foundation of which was already well-defined, and laid down by the stalwarts like Bankim, Modhusudan, and Tagore a hundred years ago. Therefore, it is imperative on our part to faithfully continue that unique trend. If the task before us is nothing more than replicating some well-established forms and traditions, there naturally cannot be much original spirit and creativity demanded of us in carrying it on. This has thus become a smooth, mechanical job for us — no more difficult than carrying a bag of potatoes to a preset destination. So we carry that potent bag, and doze off once in a while on the road.

The other half of the intelligentsia, who think that the Bangladeshis are a fresh breed of up and coming Bengalees, who were culturally so uninitiated a hundred years ago that, virtually, they must rediscover in themselves a newly born bunch, whose mother tongue, although, happened to be Bangla all along, their real conscious existence has just started recently. Therefore, this boorish group, because of the time lapse, and cultural lag of a century, is called the "new" Bangladeshis. They are differentiated from their more literate and enlightened fore-runners. But this second section of the intelligentsia is neither adequately talented, nor experienced enough to lay the original, distinctive cultural foundation for their newly evolving kinsfolk. Here lies the whole tragic paradox — those who

could have done it would not do it, and those who would like to do it don't have the mettle to do it. Thus, literally, a fresh new nation is being born in this part of the world, intellectually unprepared, disoriented, culturally languishing, or foolishly copying, imitating, and indiscriminately stealing from other people's art forms, neither knowing fully its own national goal, nor its real national identity.

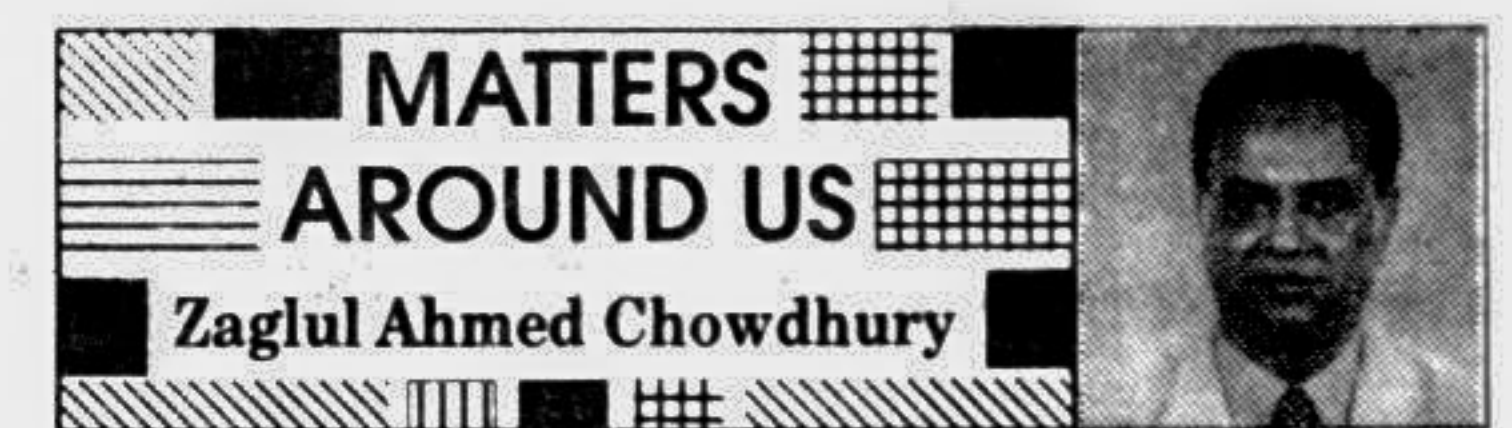
In another part of the world, a good many ethnic groups in Eastern Europe have a different story to tell. The Muslim Slav split away group went through an inhuman torture called "Ethnic Cleansing" in the hands of the orthodox Slavs, the Serbs, for five-six years, only to get their Muslim Slav break-away state Bosnia recognized. And now another Muslim East European splinter group, the Kosovans, have started going through a similar suffering for dreaming of self-rule and statehood of Kosovo. Both these people are not particularly assiduous followers of Islamic tenets (as the Bangladeshis are), and yet they are asserting their distinctiveness from the Catholic and Orthodox Christian brethren in the region with whom they lived for centuries. They feel their cultural destiny to be different and divergent enough to warrant independent political status for themselves. So they have been fighting prolonged liberation battles, dying unhesitatingly, in order just to get their new national identity recognized by the hostile neighbours, and by the world. Whereas, when our new Bangladeshi nationhood has already been assured and recognized by the world community, we ourselves would not accept this distinguishing feature of ours, this beautiful and exciting reality, nor will we call it by the new, original name. Such is the extent of our ignorance and stupidity.

If we are not proud to be different, not mature enough to detect our difference, still taking time in attaining the required maturity, then that is the root of our current stagnancy, backwardness, and a listless existence. But once the chain reaction of enlightenment starts, their will be fireworks here too, in this godforsaken corner of the world.

The writer is former lecturer of Russian Language at the University of Dhaka

An Uneasy Anniversary

As December 6 comes back with the grim reminder of the incident, the question that strikes one's mind is that what is the communal situation in India now and what impact the "Babri mosque" demolition has had on the country's politics?



Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury

including the Congress and the United Front. As December 6 comes back with the grim reminder of the incident, the question that strikes one's mind is that what is the communal situation in India now and what impact the "Babri mosque" demolition has had on the country's politics?

There has been a severe setback for the BJP in the recent state elections. The Congress, the main opposition party, on the other hand, has gained tremendously from the state assembly polls as it not only wrested power from the BJP in Delhi and Rajasthan but also retained power in the largest state of Madhya Pradesh. That it lost in the small north-eastern state of Mizoram to the regional parties is not much of significance in context of national politics and also not something to despair about when viewed against the tremendous success in three major states.

Does this setback have anything to do with the "communal" image of the BJP and would it have any bearing on the national politics? Or, was it due to other factors like the prices of essential commodities like onions and tomatoes? Or, were the defeats due to poor governance by the BJP at the centre or in the states where it lost? How have the minority Muslims viewed the BJP and the Congress in the state assembly polls?

In recent years the BJP despite being seen in many quarters as "communal" succeeded in winning over many Muslim votes, and that too, at the cost of the Congress which has traditionally been close to the Muslims. Why did the Muslims distance themselves from the

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has said that there has been no communal riots in India since the BJP-led coalition took over early this year. He is right and many Muslims and secular forces have confidence in liberal leaders like him. But there is another set of BJP leaders and governments who are really hard-liners like those seeking to impose some religious programmes like "Saraswati vandana" in schools in Uttar Pradesh. Many Muslim guardians in the state have decided to take back their children from those schools. The left and centrist parties have bitterly criticised such programmes.

However, because of the liberal section of the BJP leadership the communal parties like the Shiv Sena, VHP and the Bhajrang Dal can not take a strict stance on many matters and as a result the relations of these parties with that section of the BJP leadership is not good as reflected in the uneasy ties in the Shiv Sena-BJP coalition government in Maharashtra recently.

The communal situation in India is always under close scrutiny of major political parties. The minority factor also played a role in the recent state assembly elections although other issues like onion price and poor governance featured prominently. The demolition of the Babri Mosque has been a black spot particularly when the courts are involved in the issue. While efforts by some religious organisations — both Hindu and Muslim — to whip up tensions over the issue once again is undesirable, it is necessary that such organisations are effectively tackled by the governments in the states and the centre. Even Mamata Banerjee of "Trinamul Congress" in India, a party in the BJP-led coalition, says the December 6 is a black day. The close ambience in South Asia and the SAARC spirit largely depend on the communal harmony in the largest country of the region.

To the Editor...

Road to democracy

Sir, India has announced that a law for "freedom of information" will be tabled in the parliament for adoption.

All western democracies have this, and especially in the US this law helps in developing true democracy. That's why they are now ruling the world. Can we not enact similar law?

Sirajuddin Ahmed
6/C, Paribagh Estate
4, Paribagh, Dhaka-1000

Stock market or casino?

Sir, The country's stock market today has turned into a virtual nationwide on-line casino, where real and fictitious share certificates are used more as gambling chips rather than investment product.

Whilst regulatory bodies are busy plugging leaks in the floodgates of market manipulation, big cracks are appearing

on the walls of fragile capital market regulations. The daily netting system in both the bourses has become a devil's gift for the wild speculators. The need for having shares and money is dispensed with where trades are squared off before the daily closing.

The operation of screen-based on-line trading without the supportive central depository system has only resulted in a thriving short sale deals. Of late, the erratic price behaviour of two low-profile shares in both the exchanges have again raised doubts about the efficacy of the regulatory bodies in monitoring market mechanism.

Khuram Malik
Chittagong.

Women's education

Sir, The Taliban's of Afghanistan by their heinous misinterpretation of Islam has degraded the religion.

Nowhere in Islam there is any slightest bar to women's education. In our Prophet's time, women took part in various activities, even in warfare. Even in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, women are receiving education at the highest level. They are working in various economic and social fields. So also is the situation in the Islamic republics of Iran, Libya etc. But wonder of wonders, no Muslim country or organisation has expressed condemnation of these neo-imperialists. The first of only three countries to recognise this abominable regime is Pakistan of whose interpretation of Islam we were the victims in 1971.

Akber Kabir
Komorpur, Faridpur.

Suggestion on city traffic

Sir, This has reference to a letter by Mr Hafiz in the DS on 26th November. We may here

point out the following facts for consideration by the city authorities:

We have seen a letter published in the DS on 26.10.98 titled "Six-day fix" and there were some points to think about traffic jams.

There are overbridges and underground train systems in Delhi and Calcutta which we may emulate. Besides, rickshaws also are now under control in Delhi and Calcutta.

Rickshaws should ply only on lanes and bylanes. The writer has dwelt on Dhanmondi only. Moghbazar, Mouchak, Gulistan, Baitul Mukarram and other areas should also be taken under consideration.

Our city authority officials are requested to visit the city on foot to understand what really is the situation of the traffic in Dhaka.
M Ali
Dhaka