

New Highway, New Horizon

Road links between Chittagong, the country's main port, and the capital Dhaka have always been the subject of much concern in business circles. The single highway has been characterised by poor road engineering and design and its maintenance by the Roads and Highways Department of the Ministry of Communications has left much to be desired. The highway has also been vulnerable to regular damage due to poor construction and natural calamities, long periods of disrepair and blockade by political activists. Moreover, long stretches of this highway are used virtually as town roads, with encroachment by markets and plying of all sorts of vehicles including rickshaws and push-carts.

All these have made a nonsense of the term "highway", and caused immense problems and delays in transportation of cargo, not to mention passengers on long-distance coaches. Given that Chittagong handles over 75 per cent of the country's import and export cargo, and the Dhaka region produces and consumes the lion's share of the non-food merchandise, this road is virtually the economic lifeline of the country. In this context, the government's decision to construct a second highway linking Dhaka and Chittagong has come as a most welcome news.

The second Dhaka-Chittagong highway is still in the planning stage. But the fact that the government plans to invite private sector investment in this major infrastructural project is another positive signal. The new highway is planned as a build-own-transfer (BOT) project, where investors would manage the highway for 15 years after completion. This would certainly break new ground in infrastructure development in Bangladesh, and open up new areas of cooperation between the state and the private sector.

What the ministry of communications now needs to ensure is that lessons from past blunders are learnt well. The new highway ought to be one which avoids all city bottlenecks and provides planned and rational exit and entry points into the two cities it connects. The highway needs to bypass all other towns in between, with spacious and safe exits. It needs to be designed as an expressway with no non-motorised vehicles allowed its use, otherwise its utility would be lost to the consumers who have to pay tolls to use it. Safety ought to be of primary concern, and the road engineering designs need to be evaluated most rigorously with that aim in view.

Gleaming Doubledeckers

The Prime Minister has flagged off BRTC's new-looking doubledecker bus service by putting 37 imported vehicles to the street. These form part of a 200-strong fleet planned to ply Dhaka streets in the near future. When the entire fleet gets operational nearly 1,50,000 commuters will be ferried, so to speak, from the city roads on a daily basis making for a potential difference in the urban transport scenario.

By passenger head-count, the doubledeckers will use less road-space than most other mechanised transports, but because they would be a large new addition to the fleets of vehicles on the streets traffic congestion on the whole is bound to worsen.

So, along with procuring more wide-bodied transports we ought to try and create more road spaces to accommodate them. How do we do this? In the short term, the BRTC can remap its routes to start serving areas that remain outside the pale of their services. Rather than exacerbating the overall traffic pressure such a dispersal of BRTC vehicles could help ease it to an extent. In the medium term let's put the phase out plan into effect as far as the two-stroke engine three-wheelers go. In the longer term we ought to get some fly-overs put across important points of the city.

Four hoodless flashy doubledeckers are being set apart as tourist buses. But imagine what a highly polluted atmosphere they would be required to find their way through. Let's have a clean Dhaka campaign before we venture into this.

BRTC's maintenance track-record has been dismal to say the least. Imported vehicles coming with a shine and promise take the littlest time here to become worn-out and derelict. The import of new doubledecker buses in such a big number calls for a radical change in the BRTC's performance in maintenance area.

Interns on Strike

The strike by intern doctors in the government medical college hospitals has entered the second week. In their continuous abstention from work, services at these hospitals have virtually come to a halt throwing hundreds of poor patients into uncertainty. The sufferings of patients in these hospitals have reached enormous proportions and many, including critically ill patients, have started leaving DMCH in the absence of proper medical attention.

The intern doctors have gone on strike for realisation of their 6-point demands that include doubling of their monthly remuneration of Tk 4000. They had submitted their demands to the authority concerned and had assurances from the state minister for health on December 2. This paper wrote in these columns urging the authority to solve the problems through continuous dialogue. But it seems that good counsel has fallen on deaf ears.

Why does every organisation has to resort to strike to make its grievances heard? The other day a section of the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation led by a ruling party MP went on a 72-hour strike paralysing the passenger and cargo transport system. They had an 11-point agenda that demanded government attention. Why can't the ministries concerned talk these problems over in time to avoid unpleasant situation? Why do they have to compel people to suffer by their inaction? A timely sympathetic attitude by the authorities can help avoid many such awkward situations in a vital sector like healthcare. We would also like to suggest to all such representative bodies like Young Doctors' Movement Council to please find out ways of avoiding actions like strikes to realise their legitimate demands. This will save the poor public lot of hardships and embarrassment.

Searching for the Sen Factor in Governance

Policy-making in Bangladesh is not exactly what one could term "transparent". In the absence of transparency, it would be well-nigh impossible to assess the impact of Sen's discourses in Dhaka, let alone whether decision-makers were evaluating existing policies in light of the Nobel laureate's observations.

NOBEL laureate Amartya Kumar Sen sounded quite surprised to see the size of the audience at the National Museum auditorium where he delivered a lecture on social choice last Friday. He expected his audience to comprise of what he called "formal economists" only. "I don't think there are many formal economists in Dhaka", he quipped. So he presumed that, along with formal economists, there were also "non-formal economists", "formal non-economists", and "non-formal non-economists" packing the audience.

He may have made the remarks in a lighter vein, but there was a deeper significance to the composition of the audience. Amartya Sen is no longer the property of the "formal economists" in Bangladesh. He has now become a household name, which is likely to inspire a far greater inquisitiveness about economic policies, particularly related to poverty alleviation and social investment, among the general public that had been the case.

The works of Amartya Sen have been well-known to formal economists of Bangladesh for decades. The non-formal economists' understanding of Sen's research has been rather superficial, mostly centering on the causes and consequences of famines. But for non-economists, both the formal and non-formal types, the name of Amartya Sen had cropped up only when the Nobel prize had come up for discussion.

Things are likely to change in a rather fundamental way now.

Economic theory is usually regarded as the second-most boring thing in the world after sociology. But Sen's Nobel prize has ensured that his thinking, rather than the glamour associated with the Nobel, would find far more receptive ears among economists and non-economists alike.

The question that remains to be answered is, what effect will all this have on policy making. That is, can there be a Sen Factor in the governance of Bangladesh?

that have been set and pursued over the past three decades, then one has to assume that Sen has basically been talking to his shadow.

In order to arrive at a free, just and equitable society, Sen has outlined "five opportunities" that need to be ensured. This is not a Utopian prescription, because the realism inherent in Sen's philosophy cannot be denied, least of all in Bangladesh. After all, it is the ground reality of Bengal in which Sen's thinking is rooted. But the Bangladesh situation is

aggravated by malpractice, trade unions and employees' associations effectively reduce consumer satisfaction while protecting sectarian interests. The closed shop nature of the market acts as a powerful disincentive to free participation by the public.

Procedural opportunities are a plain misnomer here. Business ethics is desired by most, but practised by few. Corruption, in different forms, is the final arbiter. Element of predictability takes a leave even where major government pro-

prone country. Bangladesh would be expected to have adequate social safety nets in place. But apart from famine-deterring feeding and income-generation programmes, there is hardly any effort to improve such protective measures.

The government responds well at times of emergencies such as this year's floods, but for millions in the rural areas and urban slums, emergency is an everyday condition which does not fit the headlines.

Perhaps it would be necessary, in order to "own" Amartya Sen, to evaluate the current state of poverty and development in Bangladesh in light of his thoughts on social choice. What happens when the ground realities of Bangladesh, in terms of social, economic and political advancements and deprivation, are juxtaposed next to the country's performance in Sen's "five opportunities"?

The country's socio-economic data, despite claims of extraordinary development achievements throughout the past decade and half, are hardly flattering. Basic social indicators, such as nutrition, literacy, access to health care, mortality among women, infants and children etc., are among some of the worst in the world.

All these add up to socio-economic deprivation on a gigantic scale. But the sheer oppressive nature of their socio-economic conditions may have forced the people to succumb to their fate, and quietly "accept" things. Expectations have been driven so low, that even subsistence level income is seen to produce quiet satisfaction with one's lot (the operative word here is "income", because the alternative is no income, and starvation).

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a far cry from what Sen envisages when he talks about the different ways to make rational social choice.

If political opportunity is taken as the first one, then Bangladesh can claim a degree of satisfaction. The print media certainly enjoys a great deal of freedom, ensuring a free flow of information. But the Official Secrets Act and lack of a right to information law makes access to information extremely difficult. This effectively compromises the free flow of information. The re-establishment of democracy has ensured that there is a strong opposition and people have a right to take regular corrective actions through the ballot box. But rule of law is conspicuous by its absence, which has severely curtailed people's access to justice.

Market opportunities do not bring much good news, despite some reforms that have been undertaken this decade. The market remains dominated by business cartels and distorted by bureaucratic red tape. Man-

curement or procedures for bidding in the energy sector are concerned. Sen referred to the banking sector in South-east Asia as a victim of the lack of procedural opportunities. Here in Bangladesh, the entire economy is the victim.

Social opportunities are one area where Bangladesh is attempting to make some progress. But it is still haphazard, somewhat out of context with overall socio-economic development, and largely dictated by multilateral aid agencies. In the urban areas, the state has virtually abdicated its role as the provider of education and health services. In the countryside, target-specific social investment is attempting to improve key areas such as primary education, family planning, child survival etc., without placing those investments in the overall context of poverty alleviation.

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LETTER FROM AMERICA

Republican Extremists Impeach President Clinton

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Republicans say that if only Clinton had admitted to lying under oath, they would have forgiven him. And that they were offended by his trite answers to Hyde's 81 questions. Baloney! Clinton was too smart to listen to the advice of his enemies. If he had admitted to lying under oath, they would have said: "Look, now he admits! Impeach him!" That would have given Kenneth Starr the only missing ammunition he needs to prosecute Clinton criminally after he leaves office.

In the end nothing mattered to the Republicans. Not even pleas from former Republican President Gerald Ford, and former Republican Senate Majority leader and Presidential candidate Bob Dole. Republican right's hatred for President Clinton far exceeded their respect for the US constitution. The party that was in the minority wilderness for forty years (1994-94), demonstrated vividly why they are incapable of being the majority party. In a nation which prides itself in the government of the people, by the people and for the people, where 70 per cent did not want Clinton impeached, the Republicans told the nation: "Darn the people!"

History will record Clinton's partisan impeachment as the culmination of a six-year period in which the Republicans failed to play by the constitutional rules.

On the night of Clinton's first Presidential victory in November 1992, Senate Minority leader Bob Dole declared that his party would filibuster any significant legislation by the new President (60 votes are needed to override filibuster).

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Tempted by this success, the Republicans went for more constitutional mischief.

Buoyed by new majorities in both the House and Senate, in the fall of 1995, they forced the closure of the Federal government — "a constitutional coup."

This was a constitutional blackmail — an attempt to make the President sign legislation against his will.

The architect of government closure was Newt Gingrich, the Speaker, and Tom DeLay, the Whip, who

had hijacked the Republican party into impeaching Clinton. The American people blamed the Republicans for the government closure, reelected Clinton, and voted in more Democrats and less Republicans

in 1996 than in 1994.

Republicans were not done.

In August 1994, they orchestrated the ouster of Robert Fiske, the independent counsel investigating the Whitewater deal, and replaced him with Kenneth Starr. Starr at that time was already involved in consultation with a plaintiff suing the President in a civil litigation.

"No legislative majority in the appearance of justice could ever have approved it."

Four years later, with the impeachment of President Clinton on two counts of lying to a grand jury under oath and obstruction of justice, under their belt, the Republicans are puzzled by the lack of public support for their effort.

The American people are suspicious of the impeachment process because of the track record of those bringing the charges.

People know that over the last six years the Republicans have demonstrated consistent disrespect for the constitutional process and forfeited "any right to be taken seriously."

Too many years before 1994, the Republicans were on the sidelines, uninvolved with government, and "free to lob grenades at the institution that make it work."

Old habits die hard. Even after the American people voted them to power in 1994, they continued to behave like a party of insurgents, "probing for cracks in the constitution rather than taking its rules seriously and looking for ways to make it work."

In the face of intense public clamour for censure in place of impeachment Speaker-designate Bob Livingston actually said on the House floor: "Let us disregard the outside influences." (meaning, let us disregard the opinion of the people.) That was before Mr. Livingston

was confronted with his own adulterous affairs and forced to resign the Speakership and his seat in the House.

President Clinton has been impeached for lying about consensual sex, on a strictly partisan basis.

Let us look at the nice guys who led the impeachment fight. Adulterer and the House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, on being caught said, "The statute of limitation on my youthful indiscretion has long since passed." Hyde was 44 when he committed adultery (not much younger than Clinton) that destroyed someone else's marriage!

Dan Burton, the Indiana Congressman had called President Clinton a "scumbag" before newspapers reported that the "family man" had fathered an illegitimate child recently.

And the most ferocious right-wing advocate of impeachment, Congressman Bob Barr of Georgia, admitted after a Washington Post report that he had given a speech at the gathering of white supremacists — this year! Can you believe it!

The impeachment process demonstrated that there is nothing called a "moderate Republican". Virtually all the previously undeclared Republicans, the so-called "moderates", surrendered their moderation and "lined up like lackeys to follow the right wing's lead."

Bob Herbert, a columnist of the New York Times noted: "The GOP can no longer conceal that it is a party of the extremists, of right-wing absolutists, a party out of step with the political and cultural orientation of most Americans."

Why did the Republicans commit what could spell electoral suicide? Although 70 per cent of the Americans did not want Clinton impeached, 56 per cent of registered Republi-

cans did. The right wingers such as Hyde, Barr and DeLay represent heavily Republican, safe seats.

Their far right constituents and the Christian coalition wanted Clinton impeached at all cost. That is why it is hard to understand the folly of those "moderate" Republicans who represent areas with heavy Democratic and independent voters. They may be wiped out in the next election.

Another reason for right wing hatred of Clinton is his empathy with African Americans, who call Clinton the "first Black President". Clinton's programmes have helped the minorities and women tremendously — two groups the right wingers do not much care about.

On the election day on November 3, 97 per cent of the African Americans voted for Democrats — making the difference in many races. Justice in America has not been just to the blacks. They can detect prosecutorial misconduct from a mile.

They knew right away that the white establishment represented by Kenneth Starr was out to get a President who empathized with them.

The pundits have been wrong at every turn. President Clinton was supposed to have been finished after the Lewinsky scandal broke in January. Wrong. After his testimony in front of a grand jury in August, the prediction was that the Democrats would lose big in November. They won big. After the election, no one believed that the Republicans would dare impeach him. They just did!

Impeachment of the President had to be bipartisan, experts said. It was partisan and thoroughly Republican.

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