

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 look 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 fork-lifted, 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 repave 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 situation 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

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 this 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 a foreigner to 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 than 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?

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.

Answer to that question is not an easy one to put in the mildest language possible. 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.

Government officials may sound a sceptical note. Of course, they may say, there is no reason to take Sen's words as the gospel truth, nor is there a law which says the government has to re-think policies. They would be right too, even though such scepticism would probably be inspired by a desire to avoid reforms or re-prioritise expenditures. These do involve a lot of hard work, and government functionaries entrusted with generating policy options would rather not become famous for such endeavours.

Researchers and academics may provide an alternate approach, but their inputs are rarely motivated by political expediency, which makes them non-starters as far as politicians are concerned. However, when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared Amartya Sen to be "ours", what exactly was she referring to? What is Amartya Sen, if not the sum total of his thoughts? If he is to be "ours", then the government first has to consciously decide to own his thinking. Otherwise, it would seem that Sen is "ours" because he has that Nobel in his pocket, and not because he has some of the most profound and far-sighted thinking on poverty and development in his head. If that sounds sceptical, then there are good reasons for it too.

The current situation in Bangladesh gives a pretty poor reading. If the current state of affairs is a fair reflection of official priorities and policies

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

prone to 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-

grams are in place. But apart from famine-deterrent 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 hit 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).

This may explain why Bangladesh was adjudged the "happiest country in the world" in a recent survey. The survey judged people's satisfaction

with their level of income, and 70 per cent of Bangladeshis were found to be happy. But the data show a different picture: the country's annual per capita income is \$ 260, half the population live below the poverty line, functional adult literacy is around 40 per cent, malnutrition among children stands at 60 per cent, three-quarters of the population do not or cannot utilise the health services and more than half the rural peasantry are effectively landless.

So, what is there to be "happy" about? Not much, but it appears the majority of the population have come to expect nothing from life except the continuation of life itself, that is to eat enough to stay alive.

With such low expectations, the existence of widespread deprivations and denials of rights do not matter, so long as they are able to survive. This phenomenon is certainly an odd one: the higher the level of deprivation, the lower the level of expectations, and therefore the higher the level of acceptance. In other words, deprivation can lead to acceptance, provided it was pervasive enough to smother expectations.

Not surprisingly, Sen has homed in on this phenomenon, and warned against taking this "quiet acceptance" as the existence of justice or welfare. The alternative scenario to this is anger and rebellion. In fact, Sen suggested during his lecture at the National Museum that anger would not be such a bad thing even if it led to rebellion, because that would be one way to ensure social change.

Such change, however, need not come from anger, provided the decision-makers take a hard look at Sen's "five opportunities", because it is the absence of the freedoms and opportunities propounded by the Nobel laureate that is at the root of the ills afflicting present-day Bangladesh. On the other hand, once society creates the right opportunities in political, social, market, procedural and protective fields at the macro level, then it would become possible for the individual "chooser" to make a rational choice at the micro level.

The Outside Story

BY SABIR MUSTAFA

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 good 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., but without placing those investments in the overall context of poverty alleviation.

In the area of protective freedom, Bangladesh should have been a world-leader. As a poverty-stricken and disaster-

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 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 governing, and "free to let 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 voting. 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 of 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 social 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 DeLa 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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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. The truth is that after Gingrich was forced to resign in the wake of Republican defeat on November 3, with Speaker-elect Livingston unwilling to take over "The Exterminator," the Hammer Tom DeLa, the Whip-

OPINION

Baghdad Under Fire

Dr. Sabrina Q Rashid

For the fault of one man a whole nation is being punished. Innocent people and children are being killed, maimed, injured, burned, terrorised and what not. Their hundreds of years old beautiful historical city is being razed to ground. Their monuments of ancient civilisations, their homes of decades are being damaged or ruined.

But what for? What is their fault that they should suffer so? Already for decades they have suffered under the unfair rule of a dictator. For which in spite of being an oil-rich country with a small population, they could not prosper. Though prosperity was within their easy reach. But all that their dictator did was make a huge army and spend most of their country's wealth on buying arms and weapons. Military arsenal was his top priority.

As for the people of Iraq, they are mostly of simple kind. They are not so politically alert like the people of our country, for example! Even if a few were, they were immediately got rid of, just made to disappear. Therefore everybody was too afraid to speak or even think against him! If only they were bold enough to overcome their fear and the intimidation, they wouldn't have to suffer this humility and trauma today.

But this story of surrender to the one in power and not speaking out the truth against the wrongs he does, goes on in all third world countries. They never learn their lesson! Maybe for that reason they belong to the third world and will always remain so. In these countries as in Iraq the media even don't have the courage to point out the wrongs. So the wrongs by the one in power goes on increasing manifold and in the end the whole nation has to pay for it, for being weak and not raising their voice at the right time.

A question that might arise in mind is: why doesn't God protect the Muslims of Kosovo or even of Afghanistan?

The answer could be we are no more the Muslims that we should be or like the Muslims of old times, whom God had taken to the zenith of prosperity and knowledge. And here we are the Muslims of today, mostly poor

— both in terms of money and knowledge. We have a lesson to learn from this before it is too late, as we all are drifting away slowly but surely, from the right path.

As for America's arrogant and high-handed attitude trying to prove that it is the self-appointed world policeman, it has exceeded all limits of humanity and human rights, a champion of which it claims to be! Where was its protective attitude when the former USSR invaded and occupied not one but so many countries and for such a long time? Where is its duty to protect the neighbours from an aggressive country when Israel attacked most of its neighbours and is still occupying some parts including Lebanon, even defying the UN resolution? Why doesn't America fly there and bomb without even discussing the action with other world leaders, as it did to Baghdad? It is too obvious now even to the Americans how unfair its attitude is.

The reason of this aggression and international terrorism is to get rid of its huge military arsenal that it has manufactured over decades. It is useless now after the Cold War and must be reaching its date of expiry and once it does so it will be a waste of their huge spending or worst still, may even start exploding on their own soil! So they had to get it off their soil as soon as possible. What better place they could get than a Muslim country's soil. Here they can extract some money out of the neighbours too, as all are oil-rich and too naive to understand the cunning of the bomber. They will willingly give the bomber cash and arms. Not only that they will allow it to have a base in their countries.

Added to all this the bomber gets a golden opportunity to experiment with his weapons on live people and not dummies, so that he can make improvements in it and kill better next time.

It was bad luck for the whole world that USSR collapsed, especially for the Muslim world. For the power was being balanced then. As power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, it is the case of America now.

To the Editor...

Freedom at Last?

Sir, I was shocked yesterday morning by a picture captioned "Freedom, at Last" of Artist Kalidas Karmakar published in the front page of The Daily Star. I thought that Mr. Karmakar had bought the birds to release them. However, my good feeling disappeared, as soon as I read the story.

How could Mr. Karmakar snatch the birds from a poor vendor and run to the DS for a front page news-story? Had Mr. Karmakar been truly honest, he would have paid the vendor and then release the birds in public right there at Elephant Road. Karim M Iqbal Lalmatia, Dhaka

Group interest

Sir, When everybody knows that Asma's agonies are because of doctors' negligence and when people are trying to come up with protest against such negligence, Dr Sabrina, has come up in defence of doctors (published on Dec 14) and to the surprise of all, on many occasions she seemed to have spoken against only the irregularities and other ills of the society. The reason could, I think be,

group interest. As she herself is a doctor it is difficult for her to rise against the interest of doctors. And one can hardly blame her for this. Almost all groups and their members work for group interest whether the cause is right or wrong.

But until and unless people would rise above such group interest real good to the society can hardly be done. How much time, energy and money are spent in organising seminars, symposia, meetings etc. Can any meaningful society defend strike (hartal), let alone strikes by the doctors? But this happens in Bangladesh and there's no guarantee that this won't happen again in the future. Abu Imran Dhaka

Better medicare

Sir, Everyday hundreds of Bangladeshis are going for better and cheap treatment in India. As of today over 24 of medical colleges (government and private) are producing a large number of medical graduates every year in addition to post-graduates. A good number of doctors are sent abroad every year by the government for

higher degrees (MRCP, FRCS etc.). Government has been spending a huge amount of public money on account of health services for running medical colleges, hospitals in order to render treatment for public. Number of hospital beds with doctors and specialists have also been increased. In spite of such situation, why are patients having least means for treatment and going to India? M A Jalil 372/B, Khilgaon Dhaka.

The ironic Declaration

Sir, December 10 was the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On the eve of this day, December 9, 1998, I read in some local dailies that Abdi, an eight-year girl was tortured by a housewife. So far we are informed, this little Abdi, who is under going treatment in DMCH now, is about to lose her eyesight.

In the same report Abdi said that, Salma Azim, her mistress every morning used to kick her to awaken her and beat her regularly on the plea such

as tea was not made properly. What an irony of the day of the Declaration of Human Rights?

Mahmut Kaleli Department of English, DU.

Morality is safeguard of human rights

Sir, On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Declaration of Human Rights, we are convinced to tune our voice with that of the FMDA which rightly argued that "Morality is the safeguard of human rights". FMDA has advocated that "it is the morality which develops dutifulness, righteousness, humanity, honesty and responsibility in mankind for differentiating a man from an animal". So, any evil doing can never be expected from any person possessing morality. Hence, it is obvious that morality is the pre-requisite to obey thereby safeguarding human rights.

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