

Mothers at Risk

Nearly 20,000 women die every year due to delivery-related complications, so says a recent Unicef study. Even worse, most often 'untrained birth attendants' conducting complicated delivery leads to these deaths. While the mothers-to-be do not live to see the first birthday of their babies, eight of every 1,000 new-borns die within hours of birth due to injury during deliveries. Thirty to 50 per cent of the infants have precariously low birth weight. Put together, the whole scenario speaks of an alarming state of the country's obstetric, and pre- and post-natal care mechanism. However, the bright side of the gloomy picture is: the government has undertaken a Unicef-funded programme, Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric Care, aimed at reducing annual maternal deaths by half, increasing the number of normal deliveries by trained traditional birth attendants, and enhancing uptake of pre- and post-natal care services.

Over the years, societal indifference to mother-care, essentially stemming from ignorance and misconceptions, has led to alarmingly high maternal deaths and spiraling child mortality, especially in the rural areas. Despite country-wide dissemination of essential tips on maternal care by the government and non-government health-care providers, there has not been any significant reversal in this trend. That 60 per cent of the four million women who give birth every year are anaemic and malnourished bears a strong testimony to that effect. To make matter even worse, majority of delivery cases in the rural areas are handled by untrained birth attendants, thereby immensely risking the lives of both the mother and the new-born. Excessive bleeding, identified as one of the major reasons for maternal deaths, is often caused by these untrained midwives. The infants are not spared, either. Clumsy and often cruel way of conducting delivery leads to fatal injury for them.

The Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric Care project, encompassing 40 thanas across the country, is a commendable initiative in this regard. The project has certainly touched the heart of the problem by focusing on not only strengthening logistics but also improving societal responsibilities towards pregnant women. Maternal deaths result from delay not only in reaching medical facilities and receiving quality care, but also in taking decision to seek medical care. To avert that, not only the parents-to-be, but also their relatives have to be made aware of their respective responsibilities. Obstetric care, as said by one Unicef consultant, "is not just a health issue but is a social development issue as well."

Police Restrained

The outrageous behaviour of the police with a woman activist of the opposition Jatiyatabadi Mahila Dal on 11 May during the half-day hartal is known to all by now. A number of police constables on duty, including a woman, tried to strip Moni Begum of her saree in front of thousands of people which was photographed by the photojournalists and published prominently in the national press the next morning. This incident created commotion among the people and the Home Ministry suspended four policemen responsible for this nefarious act. Moni Begum, the political activist and victim of police outrage, filed a case against police personnel. Police on the other hand have filed a case against her.

It is quite natural when cases are filed they will take the normal courses according to the law of the land. But we would like to know why she should be hounded by the police on the pretext of a case filed by them? We call for a clarification from the police why her house has been raided without any warrant and why she is being sought by the police to be arrested, again without warrant? All these clearly point to the malafide intention of the police to harass a political activist of the opposition.

An exasperated Moni Begum has sought the protection of the High Court from undue police harassment and the hon'ble High Court division has by an order 'restrained the Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, IG Police and officers-in-charge of Motiheel and Sutrapur police stations from raiding the house of Moni Begum, for seven days. The court also asked the aforesaid not to harass or arrest her during the period'. This order of the High Court will allow the complainant and her family a respite, at least for the time being, from the harassment of police.

Noise Pollution

Auto-rickshaw drivers in the country, especially in Dhaka city, are vulnerable, first, to hearing impairment, and then, to complete deafness, for they remain under continuous 'impact' of excessive noise while earning their daily bread. Four specialists of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital unveiled this following a small-scale countrywide survey they conducted last year. The survey findings on auto-rickshaw operators confirmed that out of the 113 surveyed, 30.1 per cent have been deafened by mechanical hullabaloo of their own vehicles. The survey initiative, although it scratched only the surface, is commendable, because it directed our attention to a major health concern that has been left alone for a long time because of our indifferent attitude toward this high-priority issue.

Added to about 40,000 auto-rickshaw drivers, other auto operators like bus and truck drivers along with the rickshaw-pullers, who are elephantine in number, in Dhaka and in its cousin metro-cities, are also exposed to this noise pollution, and may be slow-poisoned to deafness as a result of their unawareness. The unfortunate side of this aspect is that people who are vulnerable don't even know about the perils. Indeed, among multiple health-related hazards — which also includes the environment we live in — the noise pollution is an impending misery for the entire population, because of the increasing number of motorised vehicles and a sudden rise in noisy building construction activity. Every single individual is bound to suffer hearing impairment in one way or the other.

We strongly suggest the Department of Environment and the Ministry of Environment and Forest, first, measure the extent of sound pollution, and then, go into assured action to reduce, if not fully eradicate, the causes of harmful cacophony.

Issues in Water Management in Bangladesh

On the one hand, water sustains life but, on the other, it can be and has been a life destroyer on a wide scale. It is absolutely necessary that water is managed properly for human survival and socio-economic progress as well as for the sustainability of all life forms.

In any field of human activity, an orderly progress requires that an efficient management is in place with appropriate policies, strategies and programmes for generating the best possible trajectory, given the constraints faced. The situation relating to water, which is indispensable for any life form and for virtually every human activity to be sustained, has been becoming increasingly critical.

The quantity of water is finite globally. Of the total quantity available globally, only three per cent is fresh. Two-thirds of that (two per cent of the total) is locked up in glaciers and cryosphere and one-third (one per cent of the total) is available for human use. But as a result of both population growth and increasing per capita water use (due to agricultural and industrial growth, urbanisation, modernisation), the use of water globally has increased about 7 times since the beginning of the 20th century.

In certain areas of the world, the increased demand has far outstripped the availability under the natural variabilities of temperature and precipitation. In the coming decades global warming and climate change caused by the greenhouse effect may complicate things further. Consequently, in the 21st century, the most dominant water problem will be its shortage. But, at the same time, the deteriorating quality of water will also be a major concern.

According to the evidence available from WHO, water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea, malaria, river blindness, Guinea worm and such others are responsible for about

80 per cent of all diseases and one-third of all deaths in developing countries. WHO data quoted in the August 1997 issues (article: Water Resources for Sustainable Development) of *Hydrological Sciences Journal* show that some 25,000 human beings are killed every year globally by waterborne diseases — 17 persons per minute.

Thus, on the one hand, water sustains life but, on the other, it can be and has been a life destroyer on a wide scale. It is absolutely necessary that water is managed properly for human survival and socio-economic progress as well as for the sustainability of all life forms.

Given its supply and demand conditions water is no longer a free good. It is clearly an economic good. But, at the same time, it has social implications and political ramifications. It is important that all sections of population and all relevant sectors of the economy requiring water are equitably catered for. Obviously, in response to increasing demands, water augmentation of its supply from various possible sources is one option. But it has been becoming increasingly difficult and prohibitively expensive to harness ever-increasing quantities of water. It is therefore very important that efficiency in water use is given due attention through proper water management. This would call for appropriate allocative and regulatory policies, which would include the pricing

mechanism as an important tool. But for efficient water management, a comprehensive national water policy is essential. In Bangladesh, until recently there was no national water policy. But there is one now. The adoption of the national water policy, I believe, is a major achievement of the present government. A national water management plan is now under preparation, keeping in focus

momentum. The vision needs to embrace all critical aspects on both supply and demand sides and set the sights on robust outcomes.

So far, the focus of water planning in this country has been flood control and irrigation expansion with a view to increasing foodgrain production. But water is needed for various other purposes such as domestic, fisheries, industries, navigation and environmental

stractions. All 57 transboundary rivers of Bangladesh flow into the country — 54 from India and 3 from Myanmar. Hence, the regional aspect of water management is a critical issue for Bangladesh. Within the country, there is much wastage of water due to poor management. Hence, while mobilisation of supplies may be necessary it is important that available water is managed efficiently and properly. So far people have had very little or no say in the management of water resources but it is the people who in fact are the key to optimal utilisation of water. Participatory management therefore is a crucially important issue. Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) therefore defines the contours for the planning exercise. IWRM is "a process which aims to ensure the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources to maximise economic and social welfare without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems". But the large size of the population, which is still increasing quite rapidly is a major driving force behind increasing demand for water. The high poverty ratio (half the population or more below the food poverty line, and a much higher proportion from the point of view considerations relating to human dignity i.e. all basic needs, freedom of choice, and access to opportunities) and so-

cial inequality and gender disparity are critical realities to be addressed in water management, ensuring the equitable access of these poor and disadvantaged groups to water.

Use of too much ground water for irrigation and urban drinking purposes is creating the problem of water table unsustainably going down. It is also a major likely cause of arsenic contamination. Appropriate conjunctive use of ground and surface water is needed.

The strategic areas of focus of a long-term water vision-driven water management in Bangladesh would therefore relate to the issues concerning the supply of water and its role and implications in terms of meeting the demand for water in relation to food security (irrigation expansion); management of water-based disasters including floods, drought, erosion, and cyclones; sharing of transboundary rivers and augmentation of their lean season flows; appropriate planning for conjunctive use of ground and surface water; rapid urbanisation; environmental protection and enhancement focusing on such aspects as salinity control, effluent dilution, resuscitation of silted up rivers, wetland restoration and conservation, and rejuvenation of the Sundarbans; demand management focusing on water rights and allocation, water market, water pricing, use efficiency; participatory management with appropriate roles for women; and equitable access of water to all sections of population and all water using sectors in different parts of the country.



Lest We Forget ...

by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

the guidelines provided by the national water policy.

Indeed, national water plans were drafted previously; for example, in 1986 and 1991. But those plans were carried out without any guiding principles provided by a comprehensive national water policy. In fact, those plans were not even approved by the government. It is expected that the ongoing national water management planning exercise will address the critical issues in relation to both supply and allocation of water as well as its efficient management. But a long term vision is necessary to provide for water policy and planning to click and generate a

protection and enhancement. Obviously, the various demands are competitive, and can be conflicting given supply shortages.

The key realities in the water sector of Bangladesh include the following. Too much water during the monsoon causing floods and too little or scarcity during the dry season. Being the lowest riparian in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river systems, this country bears the brunt of floods, discharging over 80 per cent of the GBM basin-wide runoff within the five-month period from June to October, and receives residual flows from the transboundary rivers during the lean season because of upstream ab-

Congress Party in Disarray over Sonia Gandhi's Italian Origin

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Sonia Gandhi was understandably aggrieved because she became an Indian citizen in 1983 and she learnt Hindi. Furthermore she conducted herself like a dutiful Indian widow after her husband's death in 1991, looking after her two children, Priyanka and Rahul. She could have easily returned to her native country, Italy after the tragic loss of her husband but she continued to live in India. She remains committed to the values of India and to the welfare of the people.

THE Congress Party in India was in disarray after the shock resignation of its party leader Sonia Gandhi on 17 May. The resignation was in response to a letter written by three senior Congress leaders wherein they questioned the suitability of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi for the top job in the country because of her foreign roots and lack of experience in public life. Mrs. Gandhi was deeply hurt and wrote in her resignation letter that "Though born in a foreign land I chose India as my country. I am an Indian and will remain so till my last breath. India is motherland, dearer to me than my own life. The contents of her letter appears not only poignant but reflects her surprise and shock. Although the majority of Congress leaders and party workers urged her to withdraw her resignation, she remained non-committal at the time of the writing.

Sonia Gandhi was understandably aggrieved because she became an Indian citizen in 1983 and she learnt Hindi. Furthermore she conducted herself like a dutiful Indian widow after her husband's death in 1991, looking after her two children, Priyanka and Rahul. She could have easily returned to her native country, Italy after the tragic loss of her husband but she continued to live in India. She remains committed to the values of India and to the welfare of the people.

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi's (52) is no novice in the murky world of Indian politics. She was the daughter-in-law of the greatest political dynasty in India. She met Rajiv Gandhi in England where she studied English and married in 1968. She had lived in India since then. She was married in 1984 when her mother-in-law Mrs. Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister, was shot dead by her own Sikh

bodyguards in empathy with the separatists. She has witnessed political scenes from very close quarters.

Her long-held abhorrence of politics was well-known. In fact she even intensely opposed her husband joining politics. She wrote of her battle: "I fought like a tigress for him, for us and our children, for the life we had made together. I was angry and resentful towards a system which, as I saw it, demanded him as a sacrificial lamb". And she proved horribly right when her husband was murdered in 1991 by a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber during the battle for re-

election. Sonia Gandhi entered into politics a little over a year ago when she was urged by the Congress leaders to become party President after its disastrous results in 1996 election. The Congress leaders realised that the infighting was damaging the party. And it needed a charismatic figure to revive the party's fortune. She also felt that she had moral obligation to her husband's death. The party ready there is a BJP slogan that India should not become a "Pope Raj", meaning that Sonia Gandhi would be controlled by the Pope from Rome. To an uneducated electorate such election propaganda might work against the Congress party during the election campaign.

There is a view that one of the three Congress leaders, namely Sharad Pawar has a long-held ambition of becoming Prime Minister since he brought Congress party in

power in the state of Maharashtra. His voice appears to be dwindling in the party hierarchy. There is an allegation that Sonia Gandhi is being encircled by a few of her favourites and she only listens to them. There is some frustration among some of the stalwarts of the party including Sharad Pawar that their views are not listened to by Sonia Gandhi. Mr. Pawar managed to obtain the support of other two leaders, former House Speaker Purno Sangma and Tariq Anwar who represent interestingly the tribal and Muslim community, giving an impression that a wider section of community are not comfortable with Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister of the country. If the Congress party would win the election.

There is a speculation that Sonia Gandhi may return to her job as the party President after several key Congress office holders on 18 May tendered their own resignations to further pressure her into reconsidering the position. In that case, Sharad Pawar and the rebel group would be marginalised leading them to form a breakaway Congress party in the hope of achieving their political objectives.

It could be argued that the perception of the rebel trio does not appear to be held by the ordinary people. To the men and women in the street, Sonia Gandhi represents her own family-dynasty and therefore has a right to step into the shoes of her husband or that of mother-in-law. They have no

qualms to see her as Prime Minister of India. During the election trail, Sonia Gandhi demonstrated her popularity to the crowd and she was seen as a saviour of the poor masses of India.

Furthermore there appears to be a strong support for Sonia Gandhi from the majority of leaders and the ordinary workers of the Congress party. They believe that without Sonia Gandhi there is no other Congress leader within the party who could unite the party factions. The ordinary workers of the party want the three leaders expelled or disciplined by the party for raising this unnecessary and damaging controversy on Sonia Gandhi's foreign roots. They do not see any problem for Sonia Gandhi becoming Prime Minister of the country.

The BJP must be laughing at the disunity among the Congress party leaders before the election. The Congress leaders have played into hands of BJP and BJP will try to spread the message that India should not be ruled by a person born in Italy and by a Christian. If the Congress party goes to polls without Sonia Gandhi, it is most likely that BJP will gain.

There is nothing strange in the fact that a person of foreign

roots has played a crucial role in Indian politics. In fact the Congress party was first headed by a foreigner in 1884. Mrs. Nellie Sen Gupta, wife of Deshpriya J. M. Sen Gupta of Chitragong, was well known for her contributions to politics and held senior positions in the party. India claims to be a secular and democratic country and there is nothing in the India's constitution that a Christian or a Muslim or a naturalised citizen of foreign roots is not eligible to become the Prime Minister of India. It is the integrity of the person which counts.

The Congress party was placed in an embarrassing position when it failed to form an alternative government after helping topple the BJP government in a no-confidence vote a month ago. The business people were happy with the BJP's budget and no one wanted another election after only 13 months. It is not at all certain whether the Congress party would be able to emerge as the largest party after the election. This being the case, as a political strategy, the rebel trio should not have opened up publicly divisive issues before the election. Once the Congress party would have won the election, the question of the credentials of Prime Minister could have been raised in the party. Mr. Sharad Pawar and the rebel group appear to have touched a sensitive nerve at a wrong time and the import could be serious and irreparable for the Congress party.

The writer is Former Bangladesh ambassador to the UN in Europe, Geneva.

OPINION Masterly Inactivity

A Zabr

Our tireless politicians deserve the Churchillian compliment of 'masterly inactivity'. Since they set the tone in the society, the leaders in the other sectors have to play second fiddle.

The champion of champions in this regard is undoubtedly the Mayor of Dhaka CC. He is a past master in the art of small talk and saying nothing, representing the dean of polished diplomats in this LG sector. The undivided attention of 10 million tortured souls in the metropolis is riveted on the distractions daily provided by this city beside the Buriganga (now almost dry). The water bodies are disappearing and the Court has issued injunctions on the encroachments. The footpaths entertain neither feet nor paths; and the roads resemble rugby scrambles. We are not white ants, but are worthy competitors.

The masterly inactivity has been amply proved during the long span of 28 years — for more than one generation. We still cannot get the basics and the fundamentals right about our country, our culture, and our sense of direction. We are still working deep inside the foundation pits, below the ground level; therefore nothing of the structure can be seen — not to speak of super-structures. It also means we prefer to keep a low profile, but it may not be a sign of humility, judging from the fierceness of the public debates on our identity and roots. If there is drama in real life, this is it — much ado about nothing.

Versatility is sometimes a curse — too much dissipation of energy in different directions. We start many projects at once, and then fondle the who never seem to grow up as adults and provide service as assets. Our liabilities are always premature, because we never seem to grow up. What is the difference between adulthood and maturity? And when wisdom starts? We have no time for metaphysical explorations. The gas leaks, and the pipelines do a turn-about (DS, May 3), and

power tenders are unregulated. Transparency is the art of hiding the garbage.

History is a heavy load to carry continuously and actively for 28 years (52 years, if we include the first phase since 1947). Our politics, like our silted delta, is heavily silted. Two billions tons silt carried down annually by the rivers cannot be dredged even by thousands of man-made dredgers. We have to learn to live in harmony with nature. But here priority is under debate: remove the human silt first, lying safe and secure deep in our hearts?

Accessibility is a scarce culture in under-developed local worlds.

The origin of nagging is fundamental environmental in origin. We are affected by the company we keep, like it or not. Dhaka is so cribbed, cabined, and confined, that many pent-up emotions and tasks do not get enough outlets, to ensure some degree of relief. Man needs brief periods for relaxation. When tension turns into hypertension, the popular medical name is blood pressure. Gastric ulcer is due to the inability to digest current situations, politically speaking. For preventing heart attacks, safe by-pass surgery is available these days. In politics, no by-pass methodology is entertained in this part of the world. What is diabetic politics is not clear to this writer.

Do we have any Institute of Political Research? Perhaps we missed something basic and obvious.

Anyway, there is still hope, so long, with due respect to the masterly inactivity we see (or are not allowed to see), we do not feel that we are towards inside a well, and have a limited view of the universe. When purging comes, the physical effect is visible to the onlookers. We are the ones who also wait and serve. The pendulum of tolerance swings too much in our country. Cannot be helped, since we are still in the stage of finding our new-found freedom.

To the Editor...

Don't touch a single tree!

Sir, The government is trying out a new propaganda by stating that there are only about 1,600 trees in the Osmani Uddyan. Okay, so be it. Now, our PM is repeatedly saying that three trees will be planted for every tree felled for the purpose of making space for the Conference Centre. But, how long will it take for those new seedlings to grow into the size of the current ones and at what location would that be?

These seem like empty talk at best. The way our political leaders go — they don't seem to be able to remember their promise to the people once their own purpose is served. So, they even don't have any moral right.

We would just like to say: don't touch a single tree!

An Anxious Observer
Chittagong.

Save the Udyan

Sir, I appreciate and attach myself to 'Save the Udyan' appeal. At the same time I am much interested to know the activities of these 'green hippies' as regards to creating green canopy all over the country.

What have they done so far?

Tanzila Chowdhury
Chittagong.

'Nato goes brute'

Sir, I was surprised to read Boris Wang's letter in the DS (18.5.99) titled 'Nato goes brute'. There the writer referred to NATO's 'so-called mistake' implying the bombing on the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade as deliberate. But what sort of motive could NATO have for such an act when the alliance is trying to store up support for its air campaign?

The supreme commander of NATO General Clark has already admitted that the maps they used were three years old.

Where is the money?

Sir, Every morning the newspapers greet us with grim news. As they say morning shows the day, these days the newspapers are seem to be doing that. Now don't take me otherwise. I have not suddenly become a crusader against the newspaper industry. They are serving their purpose to the best of their ability. It's unfortunate that nothing good is happening against those whom the papers are exposing.

Lately we are seeing the news about many 'big shots' losing their directorships of different financial institutions. For a long period we have been reading about the millions of takas being defrauded by many of our top-notch business leaders. Somehow we the ordinary people always wondered how could they manage to do so when there is supposed to be so much checks and balances in our financial institutions.

What were all those highly responsible bank officials doing? And have any of them been found to be colluding with these defrauders?

Now maybe it is getting a bit clear, if you have the clout anything is possible. Now the question arises what have the 'big shots' done with the money and is the country ever going to get any of it back? Or are they going to pull another scam with their 'clout' and get away with it all.

As they say "money can buy anything". But on the flip side of the coin, for a minute, try to

imagine the fate of a petty thief when caught in the act, you know what I mean!

Akku Chowdhury
Banani, Dhaka.

"Getting closed to the Tipperary"

Sir, My attention has been drawn to the write-up captioned "Getting Closed to the Tipperary" by Shakil Kasem published in the DS on 14th May. There has been certain misrepresentation of facts which needs to be corrected.

Immediately after liberation of the country when cricket as an organised game faced possible extinction as it was being looked upon as a bourgeois game, Reza-e-Karim held the mantle of Bangladesh cricket in a firm hand and set the ball rolling for its international recognition by filing an application for the membership of ICC. With the reorganisation of the Bangladesh Cricket Board, Mr. Raisuddin Ahmed became general secretary in 1975 and joined hands with Mr. Reza to strengthen Bangladesh's claim. In the meantime Robin Marlar of the *Sunday Times* of London wrote an article under the caption "Wither Cricket in Bangladesh?" after going through the article Mr. Reza promptly contacted Robin Marlar for his assistance for membership of ICC, who responded positively.

In response to Bangladesh Cricket Board's application, the Secretary of ICC advised the board to invite the MCC cricket team to visit Bangladesh as on the basis of their tour report, Bangladesh's case for membership will be considered. At that time MCC used to look after the interest of ICC and MCC's secretary was the ex-officio secretary of ICC. Accordingly MCC was invited to visit Bangladesh for playing few matches at different venues. It is therefore quite clear that there was no need for anyone to cajole or pressure MCC to visit Bangladesh as it

was their own suggestion. At that time Syed Ashraf Haque was not so important cricket player of Bangladesh and as such cajoling or persuading MCC to visit Bangladesh by a non-entity person does not arise.

Since Bangladesh Cricket Board at that time did not have any fund, Mr. Raisuddin Ahmed being a senior executive of Bangladesh Biman used his office in persuading the Biman to sponsor the tour of MCC. Biman as a sponsor provided air tickets both for international and domestic travel for both MCC and Bangladesh cricket teams. Without the help of Biman the tour of MCC could not have been materialised. For this Biman should get the due recognition and credit.

On the basis of the tour report of MCC, Bangladesh was granted associate membership of ICC in its meeting held in June 1977 which was attended by the then president and general secretary of BCB.

Hope these facts will set the record right. No one should take the liberty to distort facts.

A R Ahmed
Baridhara, Dhaka.

Size doesn't matter

Sir, I was amused to read a verbatim of JP President H M Ershad which appeared in a weekly. While exchanging opinion with the journalists of Bagerhat, the JP President said: "I am an elephant. Manju, Rabbi, Jhantus are mosquitoes. They cannot be my rivals because I aspire to be the future prime minister of the country."

I am afraid, Mr. Ershad has underestimated the power of mosquitoes; although tiny, these insects can very easily cause deadly diseases like malaria, yellow fever, etc.

So Mr. would be PM beware of mosquitoes.

M Zahidul Haque
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