

Construction Materials

WE seldom stare down the barrel to find out where we could have done infinitely better than sticking with the conventional inputs for construction purposes. For ages have we remained obsessed with bricks, cement and sand, little realising that the rest of the world has moved ahead using concrete blocks, prefabs and low-cost but superior technologies to build houses. In this context, the Concord Group of Companies' exhibition on Sunday of construction materials manufactured by them, has proved to be an eye-opener.

The building materials we have been using in Bangladesh are prohibitively costly, and unsurprisingly therefore, our per square feet construction cost is among the highest in the world. There is a heavy import content to it. Besides entailing foreign exchange expenditure on that account, we are manufacturing bricks by felling trees to fuel the kilns, digging out clay from the land, burning coal and gas, all of which are not only uneconomical activities but also extremely unfriendly acts against environmental balance.

The corrugated roof tiles, ceiling blocks, ornamental blocks, paving stones and marble slabs such as those exhibited the other day are cost-efficient and ecology-friendly. Based on indigenous inputs, such construction materials and the technology that goes with them can be a huge money saver for us. The country can save as much as Tk 1000 crore annually, which is equivalent to approximately 20 per cent of the total construction costs being incurred from year to year. After meeting our own requirements, we can also think of exporting the materials to raise our forex earning levels. So, the alternatives to conventional building materials promise to be an import substituting and export earning proposition all rolled into one.

That said, our principal thrust should be on low-cost housing for modest income group people. From this standpoint, the government must do all in its power to promote industrial production of 'affordable' house building materials. Of course, we know of efforts having been made earlier in the domain of low-cost prefabricated materials. More research should be encouraged in the area on a programmatic basis with the banking sector coming forward to provide credit to new entrepreneurs with viable projects.

Combating Acid Menace

BANGLADESH has the worst acid-burn cases in the sub-continent, so said Dr. John Morrison, executive director of the Acid Survivors Foundation. The number of victims, in thousands per annum, goes to corroborate such a view. Still, an effective mechanism to curb the alarming escalation of violence against women appears to be absent. There is a provision of capital punishment for perpetrators; however, it is hardly ever enforced. How many have been sentenced to death for such an offence over the years? While the victims are doomed to hell on earth for no sin of theirs, the sinners remain at large, lurking to pounce on their next prey.

Even worse, sulphuric, hydrochloric and nitric acids are cheap and easily available commodities. A glass of concentrated sulphuric acid costs only three taka, hydrochloric and nitric acids are a little more expensive. There is a bar, though. Without a valid licence, one is not allowed to procure acid. The rule is strictly followed by the two acid-producing factories in the country, and also the licensed importers and dealers abide by the same. However, authorised buyers, like jewellery shops and motor workshops, are forced to sell acid, in some cases. They often cave in to death-threats from mastaans. Besides, there is the ominous possibility of pilferage from science labs at different educational institutions.

Strict enforcement of law should work as a major deterrent to such a heinous crime. Obviously there needs to be more activism on the law enforcement front. That no one can slip through the fingers must be ensured at any cost. In other words there should be control on supply and sale of acid. Only authorised persons would be able to buy over the counter. Proper inventory should be maintained at the users' end so that any kind of pilferage can be promptly detected. Licensed buyers need protection of the law as well. Unless all these are taken care of, the country will continue to be rocked by the agonised cry of the acid-victims.

Alcohol Again

ALCOHOL, genuine and spurious, is being sold across the country illegally for a long long time. But in recent times the illegal business has taken enormous proportions. The Daily Star on Monday reported the sale of alcohol in open-air bars by smugglers' syndicates at the Patenga sea beach in Chittagong. Also on free sale are local and hill (pahar) brands. The local liquors are brought into the city from the hill districts by trucks and buses in connivance with the police, it is alleged. The foreign variety is obtained from the ships anchored in the Bay of Bengal, the duty-free shops and the Export Processing Zone. Any one can buy any quantity at a cheaper rate without having to pay duty.

Recently we have had tragedies at Narsingdi and last year at Gaibandha where a large number of people died from drinking spurious liquors. In Dhaka city a mastaan and his wife, a film director and a restaurant-owner died by drinking poisonous liquor. Like in Patenga, illegal liquor business thrives in the metropolises under the nose of the law enforcement agencies. It is alleged that police know the dens where such activities are carried out day in and day out but have been more interested in collecting toll from them rather than pouncing on them. Like Narsingdi and Gaibandha there are other towns and villages where local brand of liquor variegated spirits are sold and consumed. The number of addicts will be quite high and since consumption of alcohol and spirits is heavily restricted the whole business goes on surreptitiously. We feel it is time the government constituted a committee to assess the magnitude of alcohol consumption in the country and came up with a realistic response to the challenge.

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

It goes without saying that Sonia Gandhi has been able to prove that she is the undisputed leader of the Congress. What she has yet to establish is that the country has accepted her despite her foreign origin. This will be proved only if she wins at the polls.

ally held her hand back. Instead, she resigned from the Congress presidency to let the partymen put pressure on her to stay. She considered no better way to drown the voices of dissent.

Sonia Gandhi also wanted to act like a reluctant leader. She let Congressmen protest for some days to avow their loyalty to her. The message was loud and clear: whatever her origin, she was the party. More than that, she was the prime ministerial candidate.

There was yet another reason why she did not favour immediate action against the three. Rajesh Pilot and two or three working committee members were equivocal in their support to Sonia Gandhi. Had she pressed the issue at that time, the working committee might have split, six or seven wanting the issue to be taken up after elections and the other 14 or 15 supporting her. She did not want the Congress to carry the odium of split, as it happened in 1969 during Indira Gandhi's prime ministership. Sonia Gandhi knew she had only to wait for Congressmen to fall at her feet.

Still, there is no doubting the injury the three have caused to her. The party will be 30 or 40 seats less than it would have secured. The entire tone and tenor of the poll campaign will also undergo a change. The questions asked would have been on

non-performance of the BJP-led government, and the economic and law and order fronts. Rigours of poverty, unemployment and globalisation would have come to the fore. The government would have been in the dock. It may still be. But the thrust will be different.

Now Sonia Gandhi is the issue, not so much her inexperience as her Italian background. Election may well turn into a referendum on whether or not the country should have a

politics. It has already added to its whispering campaign that Sonia Gandhi is a Roman Catholic. Unfortunately, all this will help the RSS cover its communal fangs. It will not have to justify its fascist methods, the Hindutva and the demand for removal of mosques adjoining the temples in Mathura and Varanasi.

In fact, secular forces will be pitted against one another. Their anti-communal appeal may lose its edge because Sonia

take she got her name on the voters' list, she had it deleted. In any case, the CPM has made up its mind to side with the Congress. It believes the Congress is the best bet to fight communal forces in the country.

The CPM may not get the support of the CPI. The latter does not think that the question of foreign origin can be brushed aside without consultations with the like-minded parties. The party favours Pawar's questioning and may join him. In fact, the situation has taken a new turn. It has revived the third front. All such parties which are not yet part of the BJP-led alliance, may straightaway become members of the front. The Trinamool Congress of West Bengal has already indicated its willingness to join hands with Pawar. So has the Janata Dal.

Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party is already part of the third front. Bihar's Laloo Yadav, who was once an ardent supporter of third force, is still in two minds. He has already given an understanding to the Congress. But Mulayam's pressure on him is relentless. Trude, he does not like either Janata Dal chief Sharad Yadav or his lieutenant Ram Vilas Paswan. But Laloo Yadav has a good equation with Janata Dal leader Inder Gujral, who helped him when the CBI was at his

throat.

Kanshi Ram of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is totally opposed to the Congress. But he also hates Mulayam, who is already part of the third front. Pawar is confident of winning him over. Gurcharan Singh Tohra's men have also approached Pawar. What he has to guard against is his casual approach. His non-committal reply to a question whether or not he would forge an understanding with the BJP has not gone down well. He cannot look like compromising with the BJP, which wears the cloak of secularism. Without cutting its relations with the Shiv Sena and the RSS and its parivar of Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, the BJP is putting dust in the eyes of people. Pawar's party has to be seen and perceived as an alternative both to the Congress and the BJP.

The third front will fill the need for an alternative because the country has been getting polarised. The choice was confined between the BJP-led alliance and the Congress and its allies. It was really no choice because the difference is between the devil and the deep blue sea. The third front can put back secularism on the rails. The BJP-led coalition had assiduously put it in the shed.

Nonetheless, it goes without saying that Sonia Gandhi has been able to prove that she is the undisputed leader of the Congress. What she has yet to establish is that the country has accepted her despite her foreign origin. This will be proved only if she wins at the polls. She should realise that the real battle has just begun.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

prime minister of foreign origin. Polls in the past have shown that once an idea gets hold of the electorate, it clouds their judgment to such an extent that they forget other matters. This may happen again.

But the advantage does not look like going to Pawar and his colleagues, who raised the question. The BJP appears to be hijacking it. The RSS cadre, the party's main support, is already spreading word that a foreigner is going to rule India once again after the British departure in 1947. The RSS has also its devotional mix religion with

Gandhi will be the main target. The CPM has unnecessarily twisted the issue by arguing that the credentials of Jyoti Basu will be questioned since he was born in Bangladesh. When he migrated to India, the then East Pakistan was India as was Sindh from where L. K. Advani hailed. They were Indians before independence and remained Indians after partition. It was India which got divided.

Sonia Gandhi's case is different. She was born in Italy and remained its citizen even after 18 years of marriage to Rajiv Gandhi. When once by mis-

Kashmir: A Thorn in India-Pakistan Relations

by Barrister Harun ur Rashid

It appears that the only compulsion for India to settle the Kashmir dispute is moral. But the statecraft does not conduct its business dictated by only moral grounds. It can be argued that no country is willing to cede its territory, however disputed it is, unless it is forced to or it gains something out of the deal.

resolutions on Kashmir. Furthermore they argue that India's attempt to cite Simla Pact of 1972 to evade India's obligation under the UN Charter is misconceived and untenable. Pakistan claims that the major powers should ensure that India complies with the UN resolutions on Kashmir. Pakistan accuses India to have continued to violate basic human rights in suppressing the will of the Kashmiri people.

A view prevails that Pakistan is almost tempted to argue that if NATO has taken military action against Yugoslavia because of its defiance of the UN resolutions on 'ethnic cleansing', why can't they adopt the same tough attitude towards India?

India claims to be the largest democratic country in the world. India is known for its non-violence traditions laid down by its founder father, Mahatma M.K. Gandhi. It takes its pride in the fact that it has always opened its arms to accept refugees from other countries. The presence of the Dalai Lama and his followers in India is an instance in point.

In the light of such credentials, the question often asked is: why does India oppose to hold plebiscite in Kashmir? The answer appears to rest on how India views the Kashmir issue.

India looks at the Kashmir

issue from a totally different perspective. The Maharaja of Kashmir acceded Kashmir state to India and it is a part of the Indian territory. India alleges that Pakistan continues to be in illegal occupation of a part of Kashmir and should vacate it. India argues that the Kashmiris were given many times the opportunity to decide their will in the elections conducted by the government. The Chief Minister of Kashmir is a Muslim (Farouk Abdullah) elected by its people. India argues that the undertaking of the plebiscite in 1949 has been overtaken by later events.

India argues that it is a secular state and the composition of the majority of Muslim people in Kashmir fits in perfectly with its constitution. Further it tends to argue that the 'two-nation' theory has been demolished by the emergence of an independent Bangladesh from Pakistan. Another reason not to concede to hold a plebiscite in Kashmir appears that it might open a Pandora's box encouraging other separatists within India to demand the same (Sikhs in the Punjab and Bodos and Mizos in the North Eastern India). It appears that India cannot afford to accept such demands.

To India, Kashmir is an internal matter and the third parties have no role to play. India argues that both India and Pakistan agreed under Simla

Pact of 1972 to settle all differences including the Kashmir issue on a bilateral basis. Pakistan's call for a third party intervention in the Kashmir issue is unwarranted and is contrary to the Simla Pact. India opposes vehemently the attempt of Pakistan to 'internationalise' the Kashmir dispute.

Another question that arises in this connection is: why does not the West intervene to resolve this dispute in the light of the UN resolution? To answer this question one needs to examine critically the following: (a) Is there any country or a group of countries capable of exerting influence on India, (b) are there any compelling reasons for India to settle this dispute? and (c) what would India gain out of this?

It appears that during the Cold War, India and Pakistan were in opposite camps. Pakistan's ally was the USA and India's friend was the former Soviet Union. Obviously the UN could not intervene because of the threat of veto by the former Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Cold War in 1989, no country appears to be powerful enough to exert leverage on India. India is, after all, a large country with huge human and natural resources and to the West it has been a big potential market for their merchandise. The bottomline appears to be that no country wants to take a political risk with India for the

sake of Kashmir issue.

On a hypothetical case if the major aid-giving countries (USA, European Union and Japan) impose economic sanctions on India, there is a view that sanctions do not work and India could ride through the sanctions. On the other hand, the commercial interests of the aid-giving countries would suffer as they would lose a huge market in India. There would be a hue and cry among the business circles in those countries compelling the governments to reverse such policy towards India.

Another reason could be that the dispute is more than 50 years old and both sides continued to maintain 'correct' bilateral relations despite the Kashmir dispute. Often the West gets a confused signal by the vacillating policy between belligerence and conciliation pursued by both India and Pakistan. The Lahore Declaration signed by the two Prime Ministers after a historic bus ride by the Indian Prime Minister to a Pakistani city last February was perceived as sincere attempt to resolve their differences and it was safe for the West to conclude that the Kashmir dispute would not pose a threat to the security in South Asia. As a result it appears that the West does not accord any priority or urgency to resolve the dispute.

India does not see any compelling reasons to settle this dispute and it takes its own time. One could argue that the longer the status quo remains in Kashmir, the better it is for India. There is a view that India with its deregulated economy will progress economically much faster than Pakistan and the Kashmiris of the India-controlled part will become more prosperous than the Kashmiris of Pakistan-controlled area. In the event of such situation, it could be argued that the Kashmiris within India will be less likely to agitate with demand to merge with Pakistan. A few political analysts believe that India believes in a long 'waiting game'. By holding the plebiscite what India would gain? Probably nothing, rather it might lose Kashmir.

It appears that the only compulsion for India to settle the Kashmir dispute is moral. But the statecraft does not conduct its business dictated by only moral grounds. It can be argued that no country is willing to cede its territory, however disputed it is, unless it is forced to or it gains something out of the deal. In the light of this, it may not be unrealistic to lapse into pessimism to maintain that there seems to be no prospect for such occasion to occur and sadly the Kashmir dispute will appear to remain a thorn between India and Pakistan unless there is a transformation in India's policy towards Kashmir. Can we reasonably anticipate such metamorphosis?

The writer is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Suicidal decision

Sir, I'm shocked to know that a suicidal decision has been taken to cut down as many as 11,000 trees of Osmani Uddayan to establish 'Bangabandhu International Convention Centre' for the upcoming NAM conference. The foundation stone of that centre containing five thousand seats, has already been laid by the ex-PM of China, Le Peng and our government has started to propagate the magnanimity of such a vigorous project feeling a solemn pride in their chest. But my question is: haven't they given any thought what would be the environmental impact if these trees are cut down from the heart of Dhaka city?

It needs no telling how closely interwoven is human life with that of trees. Trees not only absorb the poisonous carbon dioxide from air but also provide us with oxygen.

Again it requires a large amount of Tk 10 crore to finish this luxurious centre and to provide other facilities for the delegates. Certainly the government has no right to spend the money gained from public tax for irrational cause. We have to stand firm, then comes the need of receiving credit in the international sphere.

So the decision to set up BICC in the Osmani Uddayan is not only economically destructive but also environmentally suicidal. And I fervently request our PM to rethink over this burning issue for the sake of the nation's broader interest of peace and prosperity.

Arun Kumar Biswas

Dur

Trees and us

Sir, It is very heartening to know that the people of this country have become environmentally conscientious. Its the people who have begun a

movement to band the ever polluting two-stroke three-wheelers which we affectionately call 'baby taxis'. Now again it is the citizens who have begun the campaign to save 11,000 trees of Osmani Uddayan.

The people of this country have always stood up against wrongdoings. The leadership has always reacted a bit late. Doesn't matter, but in most cases the leaders have been benefited by people's farsightedness. It is hoped that this time too the authority will take a correct decision regarding the site selection of the NAM conference centre taking into consideration all the pros and cons and with a vision of the future growth of this once beautiful city.

Akku Chowdhury Banani

Osmani Uddayan

Sir, May be all the protests in the various newspapers against ruining the beautiful trees of Osmani Uddayan and the pleas for saving these trees are not getting through to the unilateral decision makers.

May be they are not getting the message because it is too hard for them to understand. In order to make it easier the citizen's group would like to give them this simple message:

Trees — Good (for you and your children!)
Cutting down grown up trees — Not Good!
Conferences — B S sessions! Useless!
Building Convention Centre — Waste of money!
Cutting trees for building Convention Centre — Very Stupid!
People who are doing it are — Wrong-doers!

Rashed Nawaz

Dhaka

Save Osmani Uddayan

Sir, The people and the press have so far registered strong protest against the government decision to construct a convention centre by destroying thousands of trees in Osmani Uddayan. Destruction of such a huge number of trees will definitely cause a harmful effect on our environment.

So, we once again appeal to the government to please shift the site of the convention centre to a suitable place outside the city of Dhaka thereby save the historical Osmani Uddayan and retain its environmental significance.

M Zahidul Haque Dhaka

BICC and Osmani Uddayan

Sir, May I suggest an alternative site for construction of the BICC? In my opinion a suitable site is available at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. The site is surrounded by Rokeya Sharani in the east, Agargaon road in the north and NEC building of the planning commission in the South. There are however, a few single/double storied houses in the area which are at least 35 years old and in a very dilapidated condition. These houses can be demolished by providing accommodation to the present allottees (all government employees) in Agargaon and by giving cash house rent for a period of one year and in the meantime new apartment building can be built for them.

This site has advantage of having car parking facilities in the parade ground in front where more than 1000 cars can be parked. Only an underpass below Rokeya Sharani be constructed for driving the cars to the parade ground. This may also reduce the total requirement of land for the Convention Centre.

Osmani Uddayan is the breathing green space between old and new Dhakas maintaining ecological balance which should be maintained.

MD Anwarul Alam Gulshan, Dhaka-1212.

"BBA at the NU"

Sir, This refers to the letter under the above caption, published in your esteemed daily on 8-05-99. The writer has brought charges of 'serious deception' in BBA programme of NU and of promises held out to introduce semester system for BBA. These charges are not only irrelevant but totally pointless. It is not understood how a public university like the NU can deceive people and how promises were made that semester system would be introduced. The NU has its own regulations and syllabuses that guide our academic programme there are promises for the university to revise and update syllabuses from time to time. Any suggestion towards their improvement are carefully considered at the appropriate forum of the university.

However, we appreciate that the writer has given some constructive suggestions towards improving the Computer Science programme of the National University. His suggestions will be placed before the course committee which the University will soon set up for updating the Computer Science programme.

M Ruhul Amin
Public Relation Officer
National University

Forced labour in Myanmar

Sir, In some English dailies on 27 May 1999, one news item quoting AP was printed with allegation on the use of forced labour in the Union of Myanmar.

In this connection, Patron of the Central Committee for hosting the 13th ASEAN Labour Ministers' Meeting Secretary-I of the State Peace and Development Council Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt already explained the real picture and its reality on such groundless allegation on 14 May 1999 at the Labour Ministers' Meeting held in Yangon.

I would like to re-emphasize what was said at the meeting. If one is to believe some of the allegations found in the western media, the picture will

be rather somber indeed. We feel very strongly that these allegations were largely a result of misunderstanding of the situation and the mentality of our people.

Since a sound infrastructure is essential for economic development, Myanmar Government has placed special emphasis on this sector. Hence, a sustained effort to improve the infrastructure of our economy by building roads, bridges, rail network, dams and reservoirs has been undertaken. Realizing the benefits of the communities from these projects, people have voluntarily contributed labour so that they can be completed sooner. Moreover in Myanmar, contribution of labour not only brings immediate material benefit in present life, but also merits for future life cycles.

Without understanding these factors, some people have made all sorts of allegations.

I would like to say that there is no forced labour in Myanmar.

Mya Tun
Information Officer,
Embassy of Myanmar, Dhaka.

Why so many excuses

Sir, We are becoming really tired with the government's excuses for every problem the opposition raises.

Power and water crisis gripped the country, the government complained about sabotage and conspiracy in this, citing the reason that the opposition is doing this to place the government in awkward situation.

A man named Nurul Afzar was arrested and harassed in Chittagong, police claimed that he was an international terrorist as he had received a Fax from the Interpol, but they did not bother to verify the facts.

Nasima, a housewife was arrested on the ground that she was involved in subversive activities against the state and was tortured in the police custody. But police had to free her as they could not prove any allegations, and we learned that an influential person had enmity with her over a plot of

land and police acted on his behalf. We are dumb-founded. It is a known fact that sometimes people hire musclemen for this purpose and victims solicit the help of the police, but police becoming the tormentor is really too much.

The incident in which policemen pulled at the saree of a female activists of the BNP during May 11 hartal, outraged the people all over the country but instead of arresting the guilty persons immediately, words are being circulated by the government that may be they have some sort of a link with the opposition and police are investigating their background. We dare say that in due time something will come up on the note that to demean the government the incident was pre-planned.

There was effort to pin the blame of Jalal's death at DB office on the opposition allying that they may have had done it on purpose. Recently Home Minister had put a ban on the use of Bangabandhu Bridge by the opposition for their long march disclosing that he had intelligence report about possible sabotage by the opposition political parties. Though after fruitful discussion the ban was lifted and the long march was held peacefully, we could not but become weary hearing this sort of allegation all the time.

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

War-time speeches, not war memoirs

Sir, In the DS Internet edition of Saturday, May 15, in the article "For the Sake of Peace", the author, Mr Kazi Alauddin Ahmed starts by stating "Sir Winston Churchill the great Briton, wrote his mammoth War memoirs which eventually earned him the most coveted Nobel Prize for literature."

In fact, Churchill was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, not for his War Memoirs, "The Second World War", but for his war-time speeches.

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