

Facing the Development Challenges

Are We Preparing for the 21st Century?

by Atiur Rahman

What is needed is better coordination among ourselves and some serious homework for preparing a time bound plan of action... We must not succumb to the unhealthy pressure which has been unleashed on us by unscrupulous elements now engaged in extortion, corruption, patronage distribution and dividing the society into different political and social blocs.

THE 21st Century is knocking at our door and the new millennium will be dawning soon. Naturally, a pertinent question can now be raised: are we preparing ourselves to face the challenges of the new century? At the least, we should be prepared to look at the likely face of Bangladesh by the end of, say, two decades, in the year 2020.

Ignore them who want to do business as usual. But I am sure there are many amongst us who really want to see a prosperous and dynamic Bangladesh by the projected year (i.e. 2020). My question is directed at to this section of our 'conscious' citizens. What is their ruminations about the desired social and economic changes? Why our media has not started a serious campaign on this agenda except for some sporadic observations made here and there in the print media, though nothing quite well — organised. Not much homework has either been done on this agenda. So it will not be unfair to expect from the conscious group of citizens that they actively participate in setting the agenda for development in the early decades of 21st century.

The media, the professional bodies, the research institutes and, of course, the think-tanks, of the political parties, large NGOs, the chambers etc should engage themselves in serious debates around selected themes on development to be pursued in the coming years. They should take necessary preparations for designing an agenda encompassing social, economic and technological breakthroughs which we all want to achieve within a stipulated time frame. If we can put our thoughts together despite sharp differences in political persuasions, the nation will benefit from this collective wisdom. We will then be able to pursue a national goal for achievement. Malaysia has already set such a goal and others too have been preparing themselves for one. They are doing a lot of homework for that. We have not been

able to pursue such a collective effort mainly because of a crisis existing in our perception.

The crisis originates from the way of looking at the realities around us. The world is changing so fast that the old method of conceptualising the reality around is not only inadequate but also inappropriate.

The scientific discoveries have come to a stage where everything looks so unfamiliar to us.

The basic foundations of production and consumption have all been changed.

The role of technology has become so indispensable that the earlier means of production (labour, capital) have been significantly altered.

Along with technology, the role of knowledge workers has also gained much importance.

The concepts of factory line, mass production, labour management etc have now become irrelevant.

The location specific production arrangement is no more pertinent.

Someone sitting in front of a personal computer in Bangalore can serve a doctor working in Boston at a much cheaper cost.

All that is required is a dependable data transmission line and a contact with knowledge workers.

The technology is changing every hour and the time may come when people will live longer, enjoy the more and pursue different kinds of professions without formally going to a workplace.

This changed world view cannot be realized if we continue to remain bogged down with old ideas, education and attitudes.

We too got to change.

However, such a change will only be forthcoming if we can prepare ourselves to look at the world from a different perspective.

For a long time, modernisation, growth, per capita income have been the key words on development.

But despite high level of modernisation and growth, there has not been much improvement in the living conditions of many.

Acute poverty still persists, even in the so-called developed countries.

The inequality of income and opportunities has been bur-

geoning every year. This has been putting pressure on the environment. The natural/biological resources have been under tremendous pressure due to their overexploitation. Irreversible damages have been done to many of the delicate resources. Many of the coastal resources, including marine wealth and mangrove forests have been jeopardised for pursuing 'export or perish' policy. The environmental cost of shrimp culture (particularly tiger prawns) in the coastal belt could be staggering that we may not even think about its dimension right at this moment.

The drive for conventional development may have eased our life a bit, but the tensions arising out of unemployment, social insecurity and lack of governance may be so overwhelming that the latter may even negate the former.

That does not mean we should stop modernising. Of course, we should opt for higher level technological development. But this technology should not be monopolised by a few.

The ordinary people should also have access to the benefits of higher order technology. The livelihoods of the disadvantaged should not get further complicated and squeezed due to our option for higher technology.

Those who ignore this integrated view of the world tend to promote piecemeal changes.

Such an effort makes living more difficult for many at the later period.

The simple solutions of simple problems are then made complicated.

The complications have a cost and the future generation has to

tries. If the societies remain divided and opportunities are so skewed, it is not difficult to foresee a more desperate and tense world in the coming years. The imperative therefore, is to establish social control over individual gains facilitated by the significant improvement in technology. Unless we can design a governance strategy that can also ensure equity in all spheres, we are heading for chaos and insecurity despite development.

Given this situation and future scenario, we are really asking for a new way of looking at the world around us. Indeed we are getting into a new paradigm and should be prepared to welcome it. The new paradigm or the mental construct is likely to assume an interconnected world. This is much more than a holistic view of the world, and closer to an 'ecological' view of it.

Economics, politics, society, culture, technology — all will get enmeshed in this world view.

One is dependent on and influenced by the other. This is an integrated whole where parts are equally important and dynamic.

The people of all shades united to rescue the flood affected people with whatever means they had. I still remember the unprecedented cooperation of the political activists at the grassroots level. One day I accompanied a relief team to see the response of the ordinary people during the peak of 1998 flood. I was surprised to find three local supporters of three major political parties working hand in hand to rescue the flood victims. Incidentally, they were in the same boat. When I asked

them how this could happen when politicians in Dhaka were not even prepared to look eye to eye, they said they were doing this for the country.

Given a chance by the leaders, they would continue to work for the country. We need to have this spirit of camaraderie and a sincere commitment at all times, despite our political differences. The leaders, both political and non-political do have a greater responsibility in this regard. But that does not mean all others should just sit tight and wait for orders from above. We all have to participate in the process to build a prosperous Bangladesh.

This potential Bangladesh is the embodiment of innovation, courage, mutual trust, freedom and choice.

Despite discouraging trends in politics, we have scored many points in social experimentation. Hundreds of non-government and community organisations have been earnestly engaged in the fight against poverty. Their success in raising environmental consciousness, human rights and empowerment of women should not be taken casually.

Our efforts at controlling population growth, immunising the children and expanding the growth of non-farm and farm agriculture should not be undermined either. It is true that the war against poverty remains to be won. However, it is also true that we have made some progress as well in this direction. One may debate about the high rate of interest charged by micro-credit institutions and the impact of micro-credit in

initiating dynamism in the rural economy, but the fact remains that the poverty situation could have been much worse without these initiatives.

The government organisations involved in distributing micro-credit have not yet been able to establish similar credibility. So if there were some excesses and irregularities, all parties including the government should sit down and sort out the problems. It's no use blaming each other. This will only strengthen the hands of the money lenders, touts and others whose hold on the poor has been loosened a bit, thanks to micro-credit.

Besides non-governmental interventions we can cite many other glimpses of success in many other areas. The young and energetic entrepreneurs have already shown to the world how successfully they developed the readymade garments sector. Some of them are now engaged in developing the leather sector. Others are getting into information technology. I am amazed by the interest of the younger people in internet, software and related technology. The computer fair attracts thousands of youths. The kids are playing with computers in every nook and corner.

The role of the leadership is to encourage these kids and develop a facilitating environment and governance so that we can make a healthy transition into a technology-friendly Bangladesh. We too may one day repeat the Bangalore story here. The signals are quite positive.

Bangladesh has all the potentials of doing better than others in the next century or for that matter in the next millennium because of its strong background in culture, heritage, struggle for respectable survival, heroic fight against disaster and deprivation. The social capital kept in store is unlimited. What is needed is a collective will to overcome the odds and march forward. The 21st century will be ours if we just mean to own it.

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Russia Braces for Second Chechen War?

by A S M Nurunnabi

It has been reported that President Maskhadov has submitted a peace proposal which calls on Russia to immediately end all combat actions and asks the two sides to observe the basic principles outlined in a 1997 peace accord signed following the previous Chechen war, which gave Chechnya effective independence.

THREE years after suffering one of the most humiliating defeats in history at the hands of a small, impoverished army of Chechen guerrillas, Russia has been, lately, once again in a state of undeclared war with the mountainous republic. And there were signs of dramatic escalation in conflict.

The first Russian ground forces crossed the frontier, thrusting into two northern Chechen districts, while Russian commandos were, reportedly, moving into the northeast. An estimated 50,000 to 60,000 additional Russian troops were amassed on Chechnya's borders awaiting the order to move. Overhead, Russian warplanes continued the systematic destruction of Chechnya's communications and bridges in the style of NATO air offensive against Belgrade. The Russian air force commander said he needed not more than two weeks to finish his offensive.

Barring a sudden diplomatic breakthrough, a major ground war has seemed likely to explode. Russians were expressing their glee at the prospect of hitting back at the unruly, predominantly Islamic state that

has been infuriating them for the past five years.

Officially, they were reported to have been goaded past endurance by alleged Chechen acts of terrorism, including the major bombings of four apartment buildings in Moscow and elsewhere last month. But Chechnya's determination to secede from Russia has been equally a target.

In Washington, the Clinton administration has been, following events with alarm. 'We have asked the Russians to clarify their actions and intention,' said a State Department spokesman, adding that 'the US is urging constructive dialogue on both sides. The use of force will make dialogue that much harder to occur.'

Analysts feel there was something wildly irrational in the Kremlin's thinking, starting with the notion that a second Chechen war would be more winnable than the first one.

Three years ago, a demoralised and disastrously-led Russian army was savaged by Chechnya's guerrillas. The only difference now is said to be that there are more Chechen fighters.

Since the debacle of 1994-96, the Russian army's disintegration has continued. Budget

cuts and corruption were said to have undermined its strength, while the morale has reportedly dropped even lower.

But in some strange ways, the top Russian brass has seemed to have been feeling that it can get it right this time. One reason for their present ways of thinking is that the same military leadership is in charge in Moscow, and they might have claimed they learned from their previous failures. More importantly, they seem to claim that they have learnt from NATO's almost casualty-free successes in Kosovo.

Some observers didn't sound so optimistic about Russian success at this initial stage.

Russian critics of the military have been saying the Russian troops are moving into Chechnya too late in the year. Within a few weeks, ground operations would be slowed by mud, then halted altogether by snow, while air operations would be hampered by low-hanging

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