

Death of a legend

The world lost a person whom one can unreservedly admire, writes Abu Ahmed Abdullah as he pays tribute to late Akhter Hamid Khan

THE Daily Star of October 11 carried a small news item, on the first page, but modestly tucked away at the bottom of the last column, perhaps three inches of text. When I saw the (correspondingly modest) headline, my heart lurched. It said, "Akhter Hamid Khan dead".

The text reassured me. Surely this cannot be the Akhter Hameed Khan, it must be a namesake. He is referred to as a "noted Pakistani scientist". Similar age, similar background — "decorated... for his services to social development", "a former bureaucrat... served after independence in educational institutions" — yes, it fits. But surely our Akhter Hameed Khan would have been a more prominent display, and above all, how could one talk about him without a word about Comilla? Someone else, I decided. But a curious coincidence, all the same. The name, the service record...

The BTV news bulletin, however, dispelled my almost-restored complacency. The Daily Star of 12 October made partial amends by printing a longer account on page 2, which however, said less about Khan Sahib than about the people and institutions who had expressed their "deep shock" or sent condolence messages.

I claim no sense of personal bereavement. I was neither a co-worker nor a disciple. I met him only once, and that was in Karachi at the Orangi project and at 85 death is not unexpected nor perhaps totally welcome to the person concerned. What I do feel keenly is that the world now contains one less person whom one can unreservedly admire. Such people are rare, and they are essential if one is to retain any hope for the human race.

He was born in 1914 in Agra, and took his Master's degree from Agra University in 1934. Very early on he developed a passion for philosophy and theology. His search for truth broke down sectarian walls: "...I read the Vedanta, the Buddha, Dharma, Bhagwadgita and Dharmapada, the lives of Indian saints and heroes, and ceased to consider Hindus an inferior race" ("My troubled life" in Vol. I of *The Works of Akhter Hameed Khan*).

After completing his Master's degree, he joined the prestigious Indian Civil Service. After a probation period, which included two years in Cambridge University, he was posted to Bengal. In 1944 he

resigned from the service. According to M Asafuddin's "Biographical Sketch in the Works cited above, this was "due to his disagreement with the colonial rulers on their attitude towards the deplorable Bengal Famine of 1943". Interestingly, Akhter Hameed Khan's own explanation, contained in the autobiographical sketch cited above, is rather different and deserves to be quoted in full:

"Organising relief or reconstruction, or setting disputes, or guiding Union Councils or credit cooperatives was very satisfying. But I was also experiencing a spiritual crisis. I was constantly reading Rumi and Ghazal and Leo Tolstoy, a master closer to us in time, who seemed to make the message of the mystics relevant and real by explaining it in modern terms. The message called for renunciation of worldly wealth and ambition, and after that to embark on a laborious search for contentment and serenity. I realised that if I did not escape while I was young and vigorous, I will forever remain in the trap, and terminate as a bureaucratic bigwig, a brown *bara sahib*, rich, conceited and hollow. I also felt that after eight years of discipleship there was nothing more to learn from British masters, and I should seek new teachers".

Evidently what he was here is a classic case of "midlife crisis", as expounded and analysed for Luther and Gandhi, and subsequently integrated into a neo-Freudian theory of the life cycle, by Eric Ericson. In his quest for spiritual fulfilment, he spent two years in a village near Aligarh as a labourer and apprentice locksmith, but realised that this was not where his truth could be found. He turned next to teaching, first at the Jamia Miya in Delhi. Here, and particularly during a vacation he spent at Deoband, he seems finally to have made his choice for the secular, modernist Islam of Dr Zakir Hussain and Maulana Husain Ahmad over the... militant Islam of Allama Mashurqui or Rahmat Islam of Chowdhuri Rahmat Ali, both of whom I had revered when I was a Cambridge undergraduate".

In 1950 he came to East Pakistan, and joined the Victoria College, Comilla as Principal, a position he occupied till 1958. The decision to migrate, the choice of East rather than West Pakistan, and (though one with a good reputation) rather than some more

high-profile institution, remain tantalizingly mysterious. Perhaps those who were close to him have the answer.

His first active engagement with rural development issues came in 1954-55, when he was deputed as Director of the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development Programme (V-AID), a US-AID-sponsored "community development programme". His final verdict on the programme was damning, and has relevance for rural development initiatives today: "Evidently, V-AID was as ineffective as the crash programmes in ending the shortage. After the colossus was erected, its feet of clay were discovered. It became obvious that the vision of a united community was utopian. Whatever their relationships may have been in the golden past, nowadays the villagers did not love one another, while V-AID failed in uniting the villagers. It succeeded in starting a civil war among the officers. Thanks to foreign assistance, it had more funds, more vehicles, and more prospects of foreign trips. The affluence of the parvenu gave heartburn to the old establishment... They were very happy when the Americans turned their backs on V-AID, and it not only fell from grace, it fell down dead" (*Works*, vol. I, p. 210).

He went back to his teaching in Comilla. But his heart or his talents evidently were not fully engaged. To describe his state of mind in this period, no better words can be found than his own:

"By 1958 I was a middle-aged man whose knowledge was large, but whose courage was small. In my own eyes I was a non-hero because I had abandoned youthful aspirations to a recluse... Perhaps I might have been an executive boss or an important second fiddle. But inhibited by my adolescent dreams I spurned such mundane glories. What I considered worthy was beyond my reach; what was within my reach seemed worthless. Thus oscillating between the unattainable and the insignificant, I became an uncertain dabbler. An inner conflict made me a cynical idealist. Outwardly I might pose as a teacher. Inwardly I was a permanent pupil" (*Works*, vol. II, p. 145).

It was at this time that he got involved with a visiting group from Michigan State University who had been invited by the government to advise on rural development is-

su. This involvement culminated in the establishment of the Comilla Academy (formally the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development), and in his being offered the directorship. He accepted, as he laconically put it, "because I thought that having served a long apprenticeship with the British, the Gandhians and the Americans, I was qualified to make our experiment" (*Works*, vol. I, pp. xiv-xv). An earlier, longer account is more revealing:

"Several times, urged by a desire for social action, I had accepted rural assignments. But finding the purposes shady, the discipline dictatorial, and the planning dogmatic, I had returned to the academic cloister... The Academy was designed for training and research... I was assured by the employers that within the steel frame I would have some flexibility, that I would not have to bow down before too many omniscient bosses. What especially attracted me was the emphasis on research placed by the MSU team" (*Works*, vol. II, pp. 145-6).

There followed a decade of experimentation with applied research that was arguably the most productive and fulfilling of his life. The particular institutional innovations that he and his colleagues built in Comilla are well-known and replicated, as the Comilla model of rural development. Honours were heaped upon him, including the Magsaysay Award and a Doctorate of Law from the MSU. The "Comilla model" became almost as well-known world-wide as the Green Revolution.

Space forbids any detailed exposition here of the virtues and shortcomings of the Comilla approach. Suffice it to say that it did play for a time a critical role in the spread of the new HYV technology. Now, with the T and V system of extension in disarray, the time may be ripe for a return to something very like the Thana Training and Development Centre. And though it is probably already too late, his emphasis on "hard programmes", aiming to mobilise local resources rather than merely channelling external resources, would perhaps in the longer run have paid better dividends. And finally, with growing concern that neither formal credit nor micro-finance reaches the small farmer, might not the Comilla

two-tier cooperative structure, still kept alive by the BRDB, be able to play a more prominent role?

In 1971 he left Comilla. There followed a period of wandering, including a stint at the Peshawar Rural Academy and a visiting professorship at Michigan State University. For seven months he returned to Bangladesh as advisor to the Boga Rural Development Academy (1978-79). This was in fact supposed to be a two-year stint. He explained his decision to depart prematurely in the following somewhat cryptic words:

"But when I saw that contradictory and unrealistic policies were being happily and complacently pursued, I decided to leave after only seven months" (*Works*, vol. II, pp. 204-5).

Some of these contradictory and unrealistic policies are discussed elsewhere. They include the introduction of "soft" programmes based on quick injection of external resources, the dismantling of the local councils and hence the take-over of rural works by politicians, officers, and contractors, and a concomitant weakening of decentralisation and local autonomy. (*Works*, vol. II, pp. 194-98).

In 1983 he seemed to have found a second spiritual home as Director of the Orangi pilot project in Karachi, and experiment in urban renewal in a slum area in Karachi through people's participation. This was where I met him for the first and last time, a robust, upright figure in a beige Awami suit. He seemed content, though sad about the demise of Comilla. He had at this time a case, possibly two or three cases, pending against him for blasphemy — apparently someone had detected a veiled derogatory comment about Hazrat Ali in a children's story he had written. I don't think he allowed this to impair his peace of mind.

The author is Director General, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

FAO's flawed figures

Five West African nations have been named by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation as having significantly reduced hunger through economic reforms and stabilisation. But some experts question FAO figures and argue that economic reforms must be matched by better income distribution among the poor, writes Doug Alexander from London

IN a world where hunger gnaws at 790 million people in developing countries, five West African nations appear to be doing something right, says the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ghana, Mali and Nigeria have all dramatically reduced hunger since 1980 — posting the best results world-wide — according to an FAO report. The State of Food Security in the World.

"All of them have made a major effort at economic reform and reform in the agriculture sector and they have had economic stability," says FAO's Barbara Huddlestone, the report's technical advisor. "They've created an environment that would be conducive to small farmers and the small farmer sees it's stable, it's doing well, and it's worth the risk to invest in."

Hartwig de Haen, assistant director-general of FAO's economic and social department, voices surprise and encouragement at the West African successes.

"Africa is always quoted as a continent with no hope where everything's getting worse, but here you have significant changes," he says. "In a continent of overall distress, countries make progress."

But the West African results, one of the few bright spots in an otherwise bleak report on world hunger, are disputed by some experts who say economic reforms may only be part of the answer.

"People don't die because there isn't enough food, they die because they don't have access to food," says Simon Maxwell, director of the London-based think-tank Overseas Development Institute.

"Income distribution is the topic, and it has to do with land reform, access to credit and the other services that poor people need to secure their livelihood," Maxwell notes. "Nobody should think that just growing is going to end hunger."

His institute's research shows that in the past decade the extent of poverty reduction from economic growth is linked to income redistribution.

Huddlestone credits the success of the five West African countries to economic change — something she says other developing nations can learn from.

"Africa is a continent of very small countries, and if we really hope to have a good success there's going to have to be some way to have more economic rationalisation... they need to take advantage of economies of scale," she said. "They need to co-operate and the economic area has to be a very close collaboration."

The FAO report states that 790 million people in the developing world do not have enough to eat. They include more than 200 million children under five who go to bed hungry every night, lacking the calories and protein their growing bodies need.

Another 34 million in industrialised countries also suffer from hunger.

Although the number of people in developing countries defined as undernourished has fallen by 40 million since 1990/92, the statistics can be deceiving: 37 countries reduced the world's hungry by a total of 100 million while across the rest of the developing world the number of undernourished people increased by 60 million.

Not everybody agrees with the information gleaned from this statistical analysis of the world's hungry.

"It's encouraging that there seems to be a drop, but the methodology is very unreliable," points out Dr Stephen Devereux of Britain's Institute of Development Studies. "I think there's a rather simplistic equation of economic growth equals a reduction of hunger."

The report calculates the figures by converting a nation's total food resources into calories and dividing the number by the population, allowing for age and inequitable food distribution. The figures produce an estimate of the number of people in the country whose average calorie intake falls below the minimum required to enable the body to perform light activity.

Devereux warns this calculation may not accurately reflect the reality of a country's undernourished population. Food production might rocket for example, without trickling down to the hungry.

seeing a reduction of hunger in a country, but instead economic growth that FAO sees as a reduction of hunger," he says.

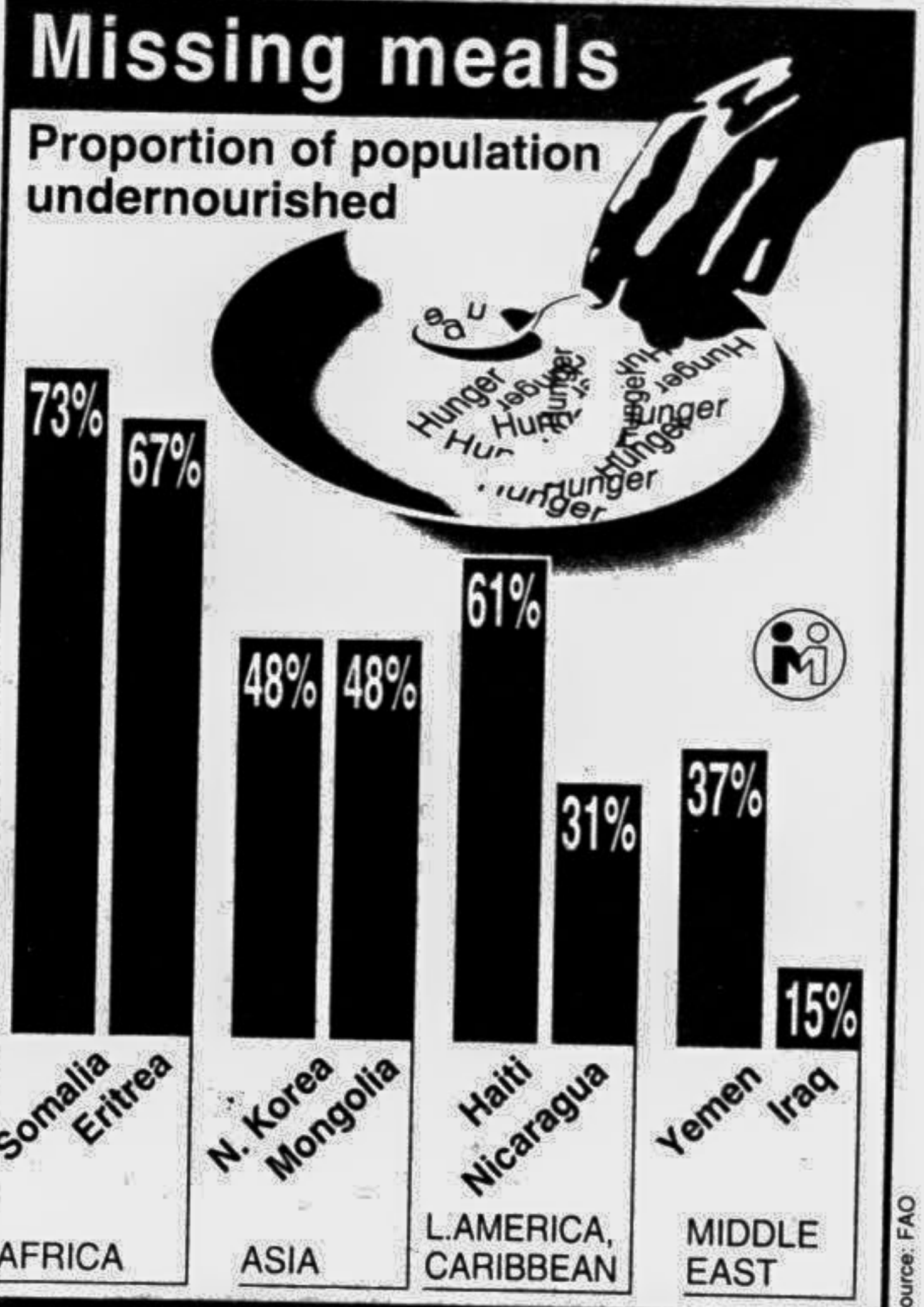
The report shows Ghana leading the way in hunger reduction, due to an improving economy and dramatic increases in yields of staple food crops, sparked by economic reforms. Twenty years ago, 61 per cent of Ghana's population suffered from undernourishment, compared with 11 per cent today, according to the FAO figures.

Nigeria, with an estimated 101 million people, also showed improvement from 1979-81 by

Mongolia, North Korea and Yemen suffer from hunger. More than half the population is considered undernourished in many African countries, including Burundi, Congo (Kinshasa), Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Zambia.

The report urges action in countries where food insecurity is most chronic, and suggests these nations require economic and technical innovations to improve agricultural productivity and specific policies to ensure that food is more affordable for the entire population.

Maxwell says the report fails to provide worldwide leadership



Breathing the unbreathable

The more the people become conscious about environment degradation the more they can expect government intervention for redressal, writes Shah Nur Quayyum

DO you want your loving children to inhale Dhaka's air when you yourself can feel that it is not breathable? Certainly not. Suppose you have a car, an a/c-room, and an environment-friendly school for your child, but what about his or her playing ground? Don't you want your child to run, play and frisk cheerfully in the open air? Think about it. Can you afford to have your children breathe the polluted city air?

The situation in the city is really critical, says an experienced physician. Lung and allergy related diseases hospital at Mahakhali in the megapolis Dhaka. "If things are left as they are today, the air in the city will become not breathable". We all are concerned of dreadful circumstances. We all share the common pollution related ailments and complain about them incessantly: burning eyes, fatigue, short of breath, sore throat, headache, nausea, sinus infection, irritation, and depression. But nobody really seems to be too perturbed of the long-term effects of constant exposure to such high levels of airborne poison. Doctors in the US suggest that exposure to pollution of such high levels as it exists in Dhaka can lead to premature aging of lung tissue and, possibly cancer and emphysema. Think about the rising volume of heart diseases and blood pressure complaints among the middle aged and aged persons.

Dhaka dwellers do inhale poison. Recent monitoring of the quality of the city air shows that the concentration of suspended particles in ambient air is many times higher than normal. The concentration of sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxide has exceeded allowable limits at more than one point. Worst of all, lead pollution is alarming, surveys conducted by the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission show.

According to one survey, the concentration of lead in the blood of most Dhaka dwellers is

higher than the tolerable limit of eight parts per million. Lead concentration in the blood of automobile drivers and office-goers has been found to be as high as 120 parts per million in some cases.

What are the factors causing such air pollution? Automobile exhausts together with fumes coming out of industries, brick kilns, kitchens, and dust from dilapidated roads cause serious pollution of the air. Among the polluting vehicles, the 2-stroke baby taxis have been identified as the worst culprits. At present there are more than 35,000 baby taxis plying on the city roads and more importantly any two-stroke engine emits thirteen times more smoke than a four-stroke engine of the same size. The main reason behind that is their fuel combustion system where lubricant is mixed with the fuel. Consequently, unburned hydrocarbon comes out with fumes in excessive quantities. Buses and trucks with old run-down engines add further smoke to the air.

Any activity that causes us to inhale poison can be identified as a factor affecting the technological external diseconomies. Technological external diseconomies occur whenever the sponsor producer of an activity service does not have to bear all the costs that the action imposes on the purchaser or other members of society. The private costs fail to reflect social costs, and too much of the action that generates the technological externality is mounted. So we can easily identify water and air pollution as technological external diseconomies.

Theoretically, government intervention is a must when technological external diseconomies exist in an economy or in a society. In such cases which exist in our city, the goal of the government should be to raise private costs of performing the damaging activity and thus to limit its output. This can easily be done by imposing direct

taxes or by imposing standards and letting the producer of the goods or services in question choose the combination of controls and fines that seems applicable.

Thus, the range of alternatives open to the government in making corrective actions with regard to external diseconomies is regulation, subsidies, or charges. In the first case the government imposes certain standards, sets zoning regulations, requires licenses, and so on. So to the greater interest of Dhaka dwellers, the government can restrict the air pollution activities of autos or any other vehicles by imposing certain standards, e.g. imposing right fitness certification policy, issuing strict route permits for certain types of vehicles, ensuring a minimum level that must be maintained in order to keep the vehicles clean and smoke free, etc. However, the standards should not be highly monotonous and geographical differences should be considered. Automotive emissions in congested cities like Dhaka has extremely different impacts from those in scantily populated sub-urban regions. The standards should be sufficiently flexible to permit an efficient allocation of resources.

Alternatively, the government can give producer firms a subsidy or payment not to engage in the offensive action; or it can subsidize control devices, waive local property taxes, permit accelerated depreciation or give tax credits for investment in pollution-control devices. If the government subsidizes the import of the devices, the drivers for their verification of polluting activities, they might be satisfied with the payments they receive from the government and they might easily be diverted to other activities. But it doesn't seem feasible as it involves a large number of baby taxi owners and drivers, and also a large amount of money to pay them. Alternatively, the government can encourage the private-sec-

tor bus services and taxicab services. Air conditioned bus service has already gained some popularity and taxicab owners are not losing money either. Similar encouragements should be given by providing tax credits and other benefits like accelerated depreciation opportunities and/or tax exemption to the entrepreneurs. Specially, the cumbersome and lengthy process of project approval should be eliminated. However, the problem with this approach is that it does not necessarily impose the costs on the polluters and is excessively rigid. The net result may be too much pollution reduction in some places, too little in others, and an inequitable distribution of the burden of pollution reduction cost.

Finally, the government can impose charges, fees, or fines for the discharge of various pollutants. Traffic sergeants can be authorized to fine the polluting vehicles directly instead of delegating the sole authority to the BRTA (Bangladesh Road and Transport Authority) only. Various other crash courses can be introduced for charging the polluting vehicles and it can surely be said that all these procedures would not be expensive and troublesome at all if the government has the honest intent not to show off to the voters and donors. Recently the government has decided to restrict the number of baby taxis in the city simply by not issuing any additional licenses. Furthermore, this practice can be very useful in regulating the rising polythene producing industry, which is regarded as an alarming polluter of the nature. An exclusive import duty has been imposed on the import of 2-stroke engines and the government is encouraging the import of 4-stroke engines. It is expected that baby taxis with 4-stroke engines would be on the roads of Dhaka within a short period.

As an alternative to direct pollution controls, the government can control pollution in-

directly by prohibiting the use of certain fuels that generate excessive pollution. Recently the government has decided to import lead-free fuel and this decision represents the government's concern about the country's deteriorating environmental condition.

In considering pollution abatement, the basic principle to follow is to ensure that the marginal private costs of the activity reflects its true marginal social costs, and with this regard, taxes or charges are generally preferable to standards or subsidies because they create revenues, which can be used to compensate injured parties or provide general tax relief. Moreover, once pollution taxes are imposed, it may well be easier to adjust them to reflect changing costs, geographical differences, and so forth. Thus, pollution taxes may well introduce more flexibility into the system than that provided by a central bureaucracy imposing uniform standards. By imposing effluent and emission fees and observing the response of the market, it should be possible to arrive at a socially acceptable set of effluent and emission charges that would bring private and social costs together where the marginal costs of abatement equal its marginal benefits.

In a democratic country like Bangladesh, if democracy is practiced effectively, the more the people become conscious about the environmental degradation, the more the governmental intervention is expected and is usually done in maintaining technological external diseconomies. So if we know exactly what options are available to the government to handle technological external diseconomies, we can at least expect such action from the government as may ensure our social as well as personal benefits. The expectations of the people would ultimately lead the government to intervene as and where required, provided the government is democratic.

Garfield

