

Environment

A thread in the entire tapestry of development

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officer) at Bagerhat in 1960. That year the union council election took place and there was great enthusiasm. After the elections, there were conferences with the chairmen. I spoke there about birth control in connection with registration of births and deaths, which is a duty the union councils used to undertake. In those days, the term birth control, although not a taboo, was seldom spoken about. These days, of course, we speak about population planning rather than birth control. To get back to the story, because I was the SDO they tolerated my reference to birth control and quietly listened to me. At the end of the conference, some chairmen, whom I knew better than the others and who were more educated, came to me and told me, "We would like to talk to you in private." So we talked. "Sir, you certainly said important things about birth control at the conference, but you shouldn't speak about these in public. It is not liked by our people. Tell us privately about it." I thought it was a good piece of advice. In 1966, I went back to Bagerhat. I headed a multi-sectoral team on a field visit to see our progress in family planning. I went out to several places and to my surprise I found out that birth control was no longer a taboo. Although I wasn't talking about it, people were talking to each other about birth control - prophylactics, contraceptives etc. Look at the social change in six years. Education did not spread much in six years. In fact, literacy rate went by half per cent or less a year in those days. My next trip to Bagerhat was in 1979, thirteen years later. Well, people, especially women, were having sterilisation. There was no social stigma attached to it. People were saying, "Sir, I have to make both ends meet and I can't do that with six children. I must find some way to stop it." So, the immensity of the problem has given us the achievement in demographic transition. But now, it has picked up its own momentum. We have an improvement in literacy rate, we now have equal number of enrolments for boys and girls, we have improved employment scenario, 24 per cent of the organised labour are women. At that time, or perhaps twenty years ago, it was may be seven per cent. We have substantial reduction in infant mortality, from 134/144, it's now about 77, mainly because of immunisation, oral rehydration, so on and so forth. We have better sanitation arrangements, 44 per cent of the villagers now have sanitary disposal of excreta. This is having a much better impact and I believe that we should achieve a replacement growth rate in about 15 years. In around 2015 or 2020, we would have zero growth rate. Stabilisation of population will begin, I believe we should be able to stabilise our population at around 200 to 210 million.

pollution abatement is costly. When there is shortage of capital, you don't care for pollution abatement, you want to save that money. Now, there we have to be conscious. The most important thing in this regard, not only for industries but also for water and other projects, is environment impact assessment (EIA), something that we don't do much. Theoretically, I am told that we must have EIA for any big project but actually we don't have it. Even for the Dhaka by-pass project EIA is not comprehensive. And technicians and engineers have been demanding, not only the environmental activists, proper EIA and public discussions on EIA. This is one area we have to enforce discipline. Irrigation programme, water supply programme, power generation programme, roads construction programme, so on and so forth should have environment impact assessment. Such assessments automatically throw forward measures for improvement.

One of the big achievements in Bangladesh is NEMAP (National Environment Management Action Plan). It is not merely because we have developed a plan but because we have incorporated public interest in it. This is one programme, which was essentially drawn up by the NGOs. Of course, it is a government plan with assistance from UNDP but it involved the NGOs. As a result, different views on environmental impact of different projects came to light. That spirit, I believe, needs to be upheld very strongly. It is there theoretically but an institutional arrangement could be made. For example, we have a Dhaka Metropolitan Plan (DMP). This is a good plan but people don't know about it. The plan and documents are in English and it costs one thousand taka. So very people have read it. When it was drawn up, there were some seminars and workshops where it was discussed. But if the ward commissioners had been taken into confidence when it was planned its quality would have improved or its implementation would have improved. This plan suggests that we should have a number of retention tanks around Dhaka. What we need to do is to identify the areas for retention tanks where no one would be allowed to build anything. Had it been discussed in public, had it been presented at local assemblies of people, the implementation would have been much better. At the moment, many of the retention tanks marked in the DMP do not exist. They have all been usurped. So greater co-ordination between regulatory bodies or development institutions and people is extremely important in environment management.

Environment is not a matter for sectoral planning. It is rather a phenomenon that encompasses every sector. In every sector like population planning, urbanisation, power generation etc. whatever you do affects the environment. Environment is an issue like poverty alleviation or good governance. It is, as I always feel, a thread in the entire tapestry of development.

DS: Don't you think politicians need to play a role in environment conservation?

AMAM: Our biggest hurdle to environment management, next to lack of people's participation, is the political climate. Although no party has any hesitation in respect of an environmental measure, they don't have any specific agenda on environment in their party manifesto. As a result, because of our culture of opposition, our political parties for the sake of opposition to the rivals eventually end up opposing a good environmental measure, com-



Hill cutting and denudation continue unabated

Our anxiety in respect of environment is very recent in origin. Although we participated in Stockholm Conference in 1972 and also we did promulgate a law on good water probably in 1973, environment was not considered an important issue. ... I think the concern began in the nineties; basically, as we were preparing for the second environment conference, which took place in Rio in 1992. And since then, I think, we have been reasonably active in the environment area.



Piling up garbage: The capital's Achilles' heel

lions here as well, coalition of environmental NGOs but they are not powerful enough to make it a national issue. The newspapers are. The result was instantaneous. The environment minister was very happy for there were real findings, which gave her the handle to do something in this regard. And there came the decision that there would no longer be import of leaded petroleum, which is the worst sinner in terms of lead poisoning of air. So, action has been taken although we still have lead because our own refinery still produces leaded petrol. They need to make some conversions. Yet, there have been concrete measures in this regard and I am hopeful that by next year we will not have lead poisoning from petroleum. Lead from chemical industries, dyes and batteries, garment factories will be there. Surely, there is more to be done. We need to have treatment facilities for victims of lead poisoning. Besides, we don't have facilities to diagnose lead level. We don't have instruments. I have always said that there should be at least two diagnostic centres in Dhaka, one in Sylhet, one in Chittagong and one in Khulna. And then some facilities for treatment, maybe not at all the five diagnostic centres but at least a central one. What I am trying to say is that because of the immensity of a problem we can do things here quite well. Although if you look at the emission of carbon monoxide by the two-stroke engines then you find a different story of dismal failure and politics is involved there.

We have over forty thousand scooters, ninety per cent of them in Dhaka. They emit carbon monoxide, simply because of configuration of their engines that they don't burn it.

But four-stroke engines can change the scenario. If we could have four-stroke engines, carbon monoxide emission would be substantially reduced. A study was done by the Department of Environment a year ago where it showed that carbon monoxide emission in some areas of Dhaka is 13 to 14 times higher than what it should be. This is the extent of the problem. The solution is not very difficult but we lag behind in taking all the necessary steps. There is an alternative in four-stroke engines. Also, electrical engines, the ones they use for auto-rickshaws in Nepal or Thailand, can be another alternative. In Bangalore, the major means of transport is bus and then scooters. There are very few taxis. But the scooters are all four-stroke-engined and don't emit dark smoke. So solution to our carbon emission problem is there - conversion of two-stroke engines into four-stroke ones. First, there should be prohibition of two-stroke engines and those that are already there should be converted. We say our biggest problem is investment. What we need is easy-term credits. Give them loans, say fifteen to twenty thousand taka at low interest rates to be paid back in lenient instalments. If you approach the auto-rickshaw owners, or drivers and tell them about the problem, I don't think there will be a strike. Now there will be a strike. Whoever is in the opposition, Awami League or BNP, will immediately come to their rescue saying that the government cannot take away their means of living by banning the scooters and that sort of thing. That is what I have meant by our culture of opposition.

DS: So, what could be the solution? We need to change the

You see education is key. When substantial section of the population will be aware of environmental rights and responsibilities, they will put pressure on the government to take eco-friendly measures. I believe the process has begun and in fifteen to twenty years we will have success in environment conservation as much as we have had in population control.

political culture, don't we?

AMAM: The major political parties in the country should have their own environmental programmes and they will obviously find that there is not much difference. Then there should be an agreement that environment is an area where we will not oppose simply for the sake of opposition. Somehow we need to come out of this polarisation syndrome that vilifies the entire political system. We need to have a political consensus because absence of it is exacerbating the situation.

DS: What role should the civil society play in this regard?

AMAM: The civil society has to play a role. One of the roles of the civil society is to bring, by their action and their urgings, the political parties together. Whatever you may say, ultimately action lies with the government and the government is and should be with political parties. Our misfortune of political polarisation has its roots in the fact that the government has not been with the political parties for years and years of Pakistan and also Bangladesh. That has destroyed our political culture. That has created a famine of leadership. So, it would be unwise to think that we can do without politicians. No, we cannot. We are political beings. You see, when you live in a society, you become political. The difference is that theirs is party politics and yours is not. When you are interested in the state of affairs in any sector of social or economic life, in how social ethos is developed, you are in politics.

DS: Shouldn't the opposition parties hammer on environmental issues?

AMAM: Yes, they should. If I were in their position, I would.

DS: But they are not. Why?

AMAM: The reason is obvious. Environment is not a popular issue yet. Public education is minimal in environmental matters. In Dhaka, yes, we have a conscious group who talk of environment, but if you go out of Dhaka, it is not an issue.

We need a movement for environment as we had in the case of population. We have been talking about population since the mid-fifties. Bangladesh came into being in 1971 and it had many problems but population commitment was there from the very beginning. There was a national population policy in 1974 although it didn't work at that time. That is what we need to do. It is good that we have more or less a national environment policy now. We have had this Act in 1995 and Rules in 1997, and NEMAP in 1992-93. It has to be kept up. It has to be adopted as a platform, which we must talk about even if we don't do enough work on that. That's important. One of the purposes that we are having the international conference on environment is to contribute to the social movement. We also expect both the government and the opposition to use the conference platform to articulate their views and listen to us.

DS: What steps do you deem necessary for adoption in future to save our environment?

AMAM: First, I expect a much more intensive and extensive social movement in environment conservation. Sec-

ond, the government must take some actions in legal matters. For example, you can buy part of a canal and produce documents supporting your ownership. But there should be a law that stops you from obstructing the natural flow of water. The same can be the case with retention tanks. Although you may own the water body marked in the DMP as a retention tank, you cannot build anything on that. So there should be such legal measures in place. I have always believed that a law in the book is good even if it is not properly enforced. It creates its own momentum. The other area of action should be enforcement of environmental rules and regulations. One will tell you that the environmental rules and regulations are not that strong. Yes, that may be true, but even the weak laws are not enforced. That dilutes moves to strengthen the law. There have been talks about establishment of environmental courts at divisional headquarters and I think that is a good move. There are certain areas where a government-NGO coalition is necessary. You need procedural definition for that. Here, a good example might be emission of black smoke by vehicles. For your car to have a clean bill of health, instead of proper inspection, all you need to do is pay the inspector some money. If you don't, your new car may not get the clearance to be on the road. There is standard equipment for testing. I heard that the government was importing some sophisticated gadgets in this regard. But that would not help because bribing would continue. What should be done, I believe, is to have a coalition of the civil society and the inspection agency at the inspection points. In other words, vehicle inspection should be done in the presence of representatives from the civil society.

DS: Admittedly, the environment scenario is grim. You have suggested some measures to reverse the current trend of environment degradation. But, in time perspective, how soon do you visualise the reversal?

AMAM: Hopefully, very soon. I am very optimistic about that. There are three areas that we should lay emphasis on: population, education and energy management. If we can properly handle these, environmental scenario will automatically improve. In the urban areas a fourth area of attention is traffic management and transport quality. Encouragingly, the new generation is educated and has more access to information than ever before. They know what is good for the environment and what is bad. You see education is key. When substantial section of the population will be aware of environmental rights and responsibilities, they will put pressure on the government to take eco-friendly measures. I believe the process has begun and in fifteen to twenty years we will have success in environment conservation as much as we have had in population control. I am very optimistic.

DS: Thank you very much for your time.

One of the big achievements in Bangladesh is NEMAP (National Environment Management Action Plan). It is not merely because we have developed a plan but because we have incorporated public interest in it. This is one programme, which was essentially drawn up by the NGOs. Of course, it is a government plan with assistance from UNDP but it involved the NGOs. As a result, different views on environmental impact of different projects came to light. That spirit, I believe, needs to be upheld very strongly.



Tannery wastes: Free-flowing into the water bodies

pletely unaware that they have taken an anti-environmental stand. That's the threat. Environmental measures, as I have said before, must maintain continuity over the years.

Yes, certain things do call for one-time action. We have always been aware of lead poisoning all through. We know petroleum combustion releases lead, chemicals like paint emit lead, but because these industries are small we did not think it was very serious. Also because, the problem is concentrated in certain urban areas. But when Dr. Nalla Khan and Prof A H Khan came up with empirical proof of intolerable level of lead in air and its impact on children, there was something to catch hold on. It had its impact on policies. The movement was carried forward by the media, especially the newspapers. This is one good thing about Bangladesh. In many countries, the green organisations lead such movements. We have green organisa-

Challenges of urbanisation

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mation. This exacerbates the existing political, economic and structural problems of establishing a new and rejuvenated urban policy. Surveys conducted by the author undoubtedly reveal very high incidence of morbidity in general and for the poor population in particular. Primary health care package with information on immunisation, nutrition and family planning should be implemented in large scale to reach the urban poor effectively. For the occupational groups both formal and informal sectors, health insurance

schemes in collaboration with NGOs and employers can be adopted. It also calls for concerted efforts to control environmental pollution, increase in water and sanitation coverage and effective removal and management of solid wastes for the Dhaka and other metropolitan city dwellers. Whilst several regimes made attempts to stop city-ward migration by poorer population in vain, they never took initiative to sustain upper and middle class people in medium towns or cities. Nor did they try to address the issue of growing inequality between the

rich and the poor in Dhaka City. In order to generate the opportunity for occupational diversification, medium towns must be able to keep upper and middle classes, which often migrate, to big cities to reap greater social benefits in terms of education and health, apart from economic consideration. The logic behind this proposition is the ability of those groups to invest and create opportunities for non-farm employment. It is up to the government and NGOs to create high standard health and educational facilities in small and

intermediate towns and provide credit for entrepreneurial activities. Both government and private sector must invest to establish paved road and transportation network connecting all district towns with rural areas and national highways. Attempts should be made to arrest concentration of resources in fewer hands by widening the tax nets and by transferring resources from rich to poor by giving later access to credit and other facilities.

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More importantly there is conspicuous gap in the enrolment rates between slum and non-slum age-cohorts at each and every level. For example, at the primary and secondary levels, more than 90 per cent age cohorts are enrolled from non-slum and it did not change over time. On the country, 33 and 56 per cent of the respective age-cohort remain out of school at those levels from slum households (Afsar, 1999). At the higher secondary and degree level, polarisation between slum and non-slum becomes more acute.