

Slanted Wheat Distribution

LIKE butterflies beholden to a beehive, government party supporters kept glued to the two lakh tonnes worth of wheat allotted to the rural infrastructure development and maintenance sector. In actual fact, they have nibbled away most of the cake under the patronage of State Minister for Rural Development and Cooperatives Saber Hossain Chowdhury. An investigative report published in Prothom Alo yesterday highlighted the brazen-faced partisan distribution of wheat under works programme with the Opposition members virtually drawing very little of it to their constituencies. Most of the allotment has gone to projects recommended by ruling party leaders, ministers, state ministers and MPs and workers. What strikes us as a remorseless explanation of the one-sided affair by the State Minister concerned, Mr Saber Hossain Chowdhury is this: he has indirectly admitted to having allotted more to the ruling party people. Furthermore, he has made no bones about the fact that this was in reaction to what the previous BNP government had done to corner most wheat to themselves. The BNP could come out with comparative statistics of the distribution they monopolised during their tenure; but we are hardly interested in the contests for constituency nurturing at the expense of the imperative necessity for a balanced growth of our rural infrastructure. What is also involved here is maintenance of the rural infrastructure. If the idea is to turn a blind eye to the need for the maintenance of infrastructure laid across the opposition constituencies then what we are basically ensuring is a half-full and half-empty glass all the time. The phrases like 'all-around development' or 'sustainable development' go down the drain with the politicisation of inputs distribution.

The largely one-sided wheat distribution has been put down to the oppositions' parliamentary stand-off, which the state minister argued, deprived them of the opportunity to highlight their requirements. While the opposition could be faulted for their parliamentary boycott, we cannot condone the fact that the normal procedure for distribution was circumvented apparently to make a political capital of it. In fact, it was learnt from LGRD and LGED sources that they had no knowledge of any prime ministerial directive requiring that the state minister for rural development and cooperatives allot wheat directly sitting at the LGED premises as he did. Normally, it is the projects prepared by the local government engineering directorate that should get the wheat allocation, not those that might have been manufactured by MPs, leaders or ministers. On balance, we should have a specific set of guidelines for distribution of wheat or any other development input. In the meantime, let the government probe the allegations as a matter of public accountability.

Right to Safe Air

THE High Court's show cause on the government as to why "they should not be directed to ensure Dhaka's air is free from pollution" lends a strong voice to the increasing concern among the civil society over this severe form of environmental degradation. Atrocious waste management, non-existent vehicular and industrial emission control, unplanned urbanisation, so on and so forth have rendered Dhaka as the most polluted city in the world, a dubious distinction hitherto reserved for Mexico City alone. Although environmentalists and members of the civil society have cried hoarse for administrative action against the lethal pollution of urban air, the government has been more or less content with promulgation of legal provisions, formation of committees and formulation of recommendations in this regard. On the ground, environmental degradation in general, and air pollution in particular, has gone on unabated despite its severe impact on the physical and mental health of the residents.

In our view, the solution lies in strict enforcement of the environmental safety provisions. Imposition of ban on import of leaded petrol was an important step although there are reasons to believe that its consumption has not stopped yet. The decision to phase out two-stroke engines, the major air-pollutant, was a step in the right direction but the five-year time frame for it was not. Then there was the plan for conversion of two-stroke engines into four-stroke ones; but here again, the implementation looks a far cry. Basically, we know the source of air pollution, yet we have not done anything to do away with it.

We hope the High Court directive would bring about a change in the overall situation. Inclusion of the Bangladesh Auto-rickshaw Business Owners' Association in the respondents' list of the show cause along with regulatory and enforcement organs of the state certainly speaks of prudence. However, ultimately, the government must bear the responsibility for the damage being caused to public health by air pollution.

Scandalous Embezzlement

THE Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Estimates has detected a number of irregularities, one of which being centred on embezzlement of about 200 million taka in the procurement of paper for printing primary school text books by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). The NCTB went on a tangent from the very start — right from the time of floating the tenders. Out of 16 companies which responded to the tender notice in 1996 for more than eight thousand tonnes of paper M/S Rusell Co-Ltd. (RCL) was selected for the supply as the lowest bidder and also for having agreed to supply water-mark printed paper as per specifications which ultimately they did not comply with. Furthermore they billed for one-third more than their quoted price and got away with the money causing an additional expenditure of about 130 million taka and that too supplying around 233 tonnes less than the ordered 8630 tonnes. The same firm was again the lowest bidder for supplying three thousand tonnes in 1998 but on being favoured again with a work order they flunked in complying fully with it.

The Primary and Mass Education Directorate had imposed the condition on NCTB for the water-print on the paper but accepted books printed on paper without the mark. This is intriguing as is the full payment made to the supplier without receiving the full consignment. The estimate committee felt that had there been no clause for water-print on the paper many others would have competed in the tender and it could be bought at a much cheaper rate. We strongly suggest that action be taken against those who are responsible for this mess.

THE Indian consumer has become king! Under the just-announced export-and-import policy, he/she can smoke Davidoff cigars, eat Russian caviar, wear Mikimoto pearls and use Waterford crystal... Our Chattering Classes can import all the clothing, kitchenware and electrical goods they eye on our 70-plus TV channels. They can even import full-fat milk, coffee, dog-food, exotic vegetables and fruits, and wheat and rice. They can now live like true foreigners here. Only the air they breathe and the water they consume (after purification) need be Indian.

That is the direction Mr Miranoli Maran is giving to our Exim policy by removing quantitative restrictions on 714 items in keeping with a deal made with the US on abolishing quantitative restrictions in December—well ahead of GATT/WTO obligations. His explanation for doing this is bland and arrogant: "We are now a confident, resurgent India... we need not bother about..."

Clearly, the post-Clinton hype of "resurgent" India being one of the world's 10 fastest-growing economies has made Mr Maran blind to robust realities—despite the stockmarket bubble bursting, India is among the lowest 40 in UN Human Development ranking. Sixty per cent of Indians have less than

Blind-alley 'Shortcut' to Growth

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

MacCulture is not the way ahead for us. That way can only lie in addressing our people's needs, providing food, income and employment security, and reducing inequalities. Our current policies will take us in the opposite direction and vastly increase social cleavages. Caviar capitalism has failed miserably in the country that produces the world's best caviar—Russia. It is doomed here too.

\$1 a day to spend. Over 50 million people sank below the poverty line in the past decade. Caviar, smoked ham and Waterford crystal are significant for 0.1 per cent of the population. Such imports have no larger spinoffs or forward linkages in our economy.

However, for the likes of Mr Maran, India is not a country of one billion humans, but the world's "third largest investor base... with 20 million shareholders, 9,000 listed companies, 23 stock exchanges..." \$10 billion in foreign direct investment is absolutely "critical" for this India's growth.

This defies reality. FDI into India has never even equalled one per cent of GDP, or \$3.5 billion. And yet, every Prime Minister and every chief minister goes abroad begging for FDI. FDI flows this year are falling and likely to be about \$ 3 billion. The FDI mantra is chanted although half the investment goes into paper transactions.

Now, Mr Maran has added a "caviar" dimension to the

search for shortcuts to growth. His policy will jeopardise many Indian livelihoods through predatory trade practices on the part of foreign exporters. In the US, there is no market for chicken legs, only for breasts. Legs, an Indian favourite, will be imported at Rs. 16 per kg—against our domestic price of Rs. 40.

One need not shed too many tears for India's poultry industry. But what about the millions of small farmers being ruined by rice or wheat imports? Should food security not come before "free" trade?

Mr Maran, like Mr Yashwanth Sinha, believes that our economic growth should be "export-led". One of the two main instruments for achieving this is "thrust areas", gems and jewellery, leather, garments, pharmaceuticals and agro-chemicals. Let us think that "resurgent" India's new growth areas are going to be technology-intensive, we are still going to be exploiting cheap labour and low skills.

The second instrument of export-led growth will be Chinese-style special economic zones (SEZs), "free-market" enclaves, where there will be free movement of goods and most Indian laws don't apply. Two new SEZs will be created and four existing zones will be upgraded, including SEEPZ in Mumbai. However, SEZs have not proved effective motors of export promotion anywhere. ILO-sponsored studies show that the "success" of most such zones—like Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia or South Korea—is very limited and based on undesirable practices such as absence of labour protection, smashing of unions, inhuman working conditions (e.g. toy factory infernos killing hundreds of locked-up workers in China and Thailand).

In China, SEZs function largely as export platforms for cheap labour-based production. India's export processing zones (EPZs) are a story of appalling working conditions and of failures, only temporarily relieved by generous state doleouts. SEEPZ is now successful—not as an electronics export zone,

but as a computer software base, which happens to be located at Santa Cruz. SEZs can't be magically more successful than EPZs. But our neo-liberals contradictorily advocate "free market" laissez faire, and deliberate export promotion simultaneously. They are guilty of three big errors.

They forget that historically, market forces alone have never produced real development or balanced growth. Typically, state intervention, including protection of nascent industry, is necessary to spur growth, push investment into capital-poor areas, and discipline capital. The first theorem of development economics established by Amartya Sen is that growth alone cannot abolish mass-scale poverty and deprivation. Public action is indispensable.

Second, there are no pathways to rapid growth which bypass the vast majority and concentrate on small enclaves or social groups. That's the road that some East Asian "miracle" economies took—to disastrous effect, as the Great Crash two

years ago showed. Third, no amount of "MacDonaldisation" (i.e. reliance upon consumerist-oriented FDI) will broaden real consumer choice or bring in new technology. It cannot promote healthy growth.

On this, evidence is overwhelming. Chemicalised junk food has deforested the Amazon basin, and degraded public taste and quality of nutrition. MacDonald's commits uncompetitive, anti-union and market-dominating practices. In country after country, it has manipulated people's—especially children's—tastes.

In Japan, it miniaturised the hamburger to make it resemble highly-valued sushi. And in India, it is launching highly unethical advertisements directed at five-year-olds, intended to "prove" that burgers improve self-confidence and academic performance!

MacCulture is not the way ahead for us. That way can only lie in addressing our people's needs, providing food, income and employment security, and reducing inequalities. Our current policies will take us in the opposite direction and vastly increase social cleavages. Caviar capitalism has failed miserably in the country that produces the world's best caviar—Russia. It is doomed here too.

OPINION

Row over Naming: Quest for Root Causes

by A R Shamsul Islam

NOBODY will probably deny that the row over naming the halls of Shah Jalal University of Science and Technology has touched off a crisis mark.

To understand the problem one is to carefully weigh certain geo-political factors of the district of Sylhet together with the specialities of Shah Jalal University. Firstly, the land of Sylhet has produced a host of political leaders. But they seem to be oversensitive about their sphere of influence, intolerant of interference by anybody else in their domains. It seems a sort of proprietary attitude has worked up in their mind. Chronic personality clash has vitiated the atmosphere and destroyed peace and tranquillity of the locality.

Secondly, the district takes pride in, and preference over sister districts of the country, being the abode of hundreds of saints and spiritual leaders headed by Hajrat Shah Jalal. There are interested quarters at hand who are on their toes to provoke this sentiment of the people under the cloak of achieving petty personal and parochial gains. Understandably the people of Sylhet are no fool to fail to guess the trick of the interested quarters. But sentiments particularly those associated with religious and spiritual matters do not need sagrily stand by the canon of logic.

Thirdly, as some allege, the 'fundamentalists' have reportedly built up in the north-east a belt of predominance which includes the district of Sylhet.

Fourthly, Shah Jalal university has stood out as an exception compared to the vitiated environment of sister institutions across the country. It was free from session jam, unhealthy student politics, class boycott, rowdiness etc. The university is learnt to have possessed costly updated science equipment to groom the taught to face the challenges of time. It is no wonder that the vested interests that have already gripped almost all the premier universities of the country viz those in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and even the BUET, can hardly spare Shah Jalal University to remain away from their control.

As the crisis of Shah Jalal University is deepening the

question that agitates our mind is what are the root causes of this lingering crisis. Below is an attempt to sort out some of them:

Firstly, it is a matter of grave concern that instead of forging unity the nation has gone sharply divided. Starting from political parties the schism has trickled down to all segments and tiers of society. Wherever you go wherever you tap you will hear the same song of discord and vendetta. No community of the society can claim to be immune from this malaise. It is but very natural that the same sinister division is witnessed among Shah Jalal University authorities, teachers and students, more so among the political leaders and their disciples of Sylhet. Division has become our creed. Destruction our passion.

Secondly, who doesn't know that difference of opinion is the essence of democracy? But it certainly envisages a difference of that sort based on reasoning and committed to the weal of the people. On the other hand difference must be expressed firmly but politely with utmost respect for and tolerance to others' views. Unfortunately our country faces just the reverse of expectations. Here difference is divorced from any will to deliver good to the people. It is expressed in most lethal, often vulgar, vocabulary leading to a game of mutual character assassination and physical extermination. Aren't the mutually opposed groups of Shah Jalal University, political leaders and people of Sylhet, after blowing enough fanfare of heroics, waiting for the kill of one another's opponents?

Thirdly, wielding maximum political powers having minimum respect for ethics is dangerous. It is alleged that the Speaker of the assembly having failed to name a hall of Shah Jalal University after him or in lieu his mother, set his hand to fanning the cheap regional sentiments of the people of Sylhet on one hand and on the other secretly joined hands with the fascist fundamentalists to foil the decision of naming halls.

Fourthly, ineffectiveness and indifference of the government machinery to curb the miscreants have aggravated the

problem. Rowdiness occurred one after another on the campus but on most occasions the law-enforcing agency kept mum giving maximum latitude to the hoodlums who became insolent and desperate drifting beyond anybody's control. As the government loses sight of the truth of "nipping in the bud" it later falls short of braving the evil products fed on its (government) own indulgence.

Fifthly, it is noted with concern that the present pro-liberation government has let its stand against 'fundamentalism' dilute. This has enormously helped the reactionary elements grow up and throw down the gauntlet to the liberal forces. A reign of terror has been let loose by the 'fundamentalists' on the campus of Shah Jalal University before the very nose of the government that has dismally failed to control the situation.

Sixthly, almost all governments of Bangladesh, excepting the caretaker ones, but particularly the last two ones, are accused of pursuing politicisation of institutions and establishments. Under the process educational institutions, particularly those of higher echelon, practically stand overrun by

belligent student politics by and large controlled and commanded by outside forces. Even the teachers of the educational institutions including the universities are wooed and cooed to come overtly or covertly into the fold of national partisan politics. It is alleged that the VC of Shah Jalal University, despite being a liberal and lovable personality, showed unnecessary haste and over-enthusiasm to perform formalities in naming the university halls the construction works of some of which have not yet been taken in hand.

Seventhly, it is agreed by all that lack of accountability of the law-enforcing agency has lavishly contributed to the breakdown of the law and order situation across the country. It is alleged that amidst the existing turmoil in Shah Jalal University, the police has worked the way it has been briefed by the ruling party. But the ruling party should remember that the police moves around more according to its own calculated design that becomes easier to achieve as the government having tried to use the police has rendered it (police) less answerable to the government for its (police) activities. In fact police

is never people's police, only sometimes ruling party's police and most times police's police.

Eighthly, it is reported that the agenda of naming the halls of Shah Jalal University went somehow smooth till Shaheed-mother Jahanara Imam's name was approved for naming a hall. If that be really so the controversy assumes a newer significance. Late Jahanara Imam was the founder of 'Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee' (Committee for wiping out the killers and collaborators). She is widely acclaimed as a symbol of Liberation War of 1971 and votary of punishing the killers and collaborators who joined hands with the occupation forces. To the anti-liberation forces she was probably the most feared and disliked personality. They cannot stand a hall being named after her. In one way it is a pointer to what a bigger hand the anti-liberation forces have had in the naming-crisis of Shah Jalal University and how much of strength they have gathered to try to negate the decision of Shah Jalal University authority. They are hell-bent upon reversing the course of history as it played in the Liberation War of 1971. This diabolical design is apt to precipitate crises of massive magnitudes that the people of Bangladesh cannot possibly avoid to face.

Ninthly, in the crisis of Shah Jalal University the same tragedy of lack of conscience of the nation is manifest. Vandalism of all descriptions has been perpetrated on and off the campus. Teachers were assaulted, death-sentence alleged to have been issued by the 'fundamentalist' groups was served on them, university buildings and property, teachers' residences, cars etc. were smashed and torched. Of course protests and condemnations against these atrocities came but these were not so deep and wide-ranged as could shake the perpetrators. In a sense the entire nation more or less pathetically stood as mute spectators. As another wake-up call, a top novelist and screen-playwright recently observed a day-long family-limited hunger strike at the threshold of Shah Jalal University to register a silent—but resonant with emphatic mute messages—protest against the ugly incidents at Shah Jalal University and he urged upon the authorities to resume classes of the university. Unfortunately till now there is no indication that the sleeping conscience of the nation will wake up.

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Establishment of Six New Agricultural and 12 Science and Technology Varsities

Syed Merajul Hossain

The government has decided to facilitate the advancement of scientific and technological higher education including computer technology at the university level. The Prime Minister and the Education Minister took executive decision in the cabinet to establish 12 Science and Technology Universities of a smaller nature in the greater districts where there is no university. The greater districts are: Dinajpur, Rangpur, Education sub-sector, Faridpur, Patuakhali, Barisal, Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The government further decided to establish six universities in the first phase during the 1997-2002 period. The Ministry of Education advised the University Grants Commission (UGC) to prepare the Project Concept Paper (PCP) i.e. development scheme for funding from the education sub-sector of the Planning Commission. Accordingly a combined single scheme (PCP) was prepared and was approved in an ECNEC meeting presided over by the Prime Minister on December 18, 1997. The scheme (PCP) had a provision for Taka 90 crore with Taka 15 crore for each of the six universities. Each university would comprise of five faculties viz, physical science, life science, agriculture and mineral science, social science and applied science and technologies.

According to ECNEC decision all these six universities would be established as complete entities with provision of 300 students' enrollment. There is no provision in the approved scheme to cover Dinajpur, Hajj Mohammad Danesh Agriculture College and Patuakhali Agriculture College into Science and Technology Universities. In the ECNEC decision there are provisions to acquire 50 acres of land for each university and there is no provision to acquire land for the establishment of experimental agriculture farm (field laboratory) for the practical training of the students of the faculty of agriculture.

It is learnt that during the implementation stage the political leaders of Patuakhali and Dinajpur districts informed the authority concerned that conversion of these two agriculture colleges into Science and Technology Universities will not be in the best interests of the country. It is further learnt that the authority being convinced of the said proposals took decision to convert Dina-

pur and Patuakhali agriculture colleges into Science and Technology Universities without referring the issue to the parliamentary standing committees concerned (Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Education). Even a revised PCP merging the two agriculture colleges has not yet been approved by the ECNEC.

As per executive decision of the authority concerned the Ministry of Education told the Ministry of Agriculture to hand over Dinajpur and Patuakhali agriculture colleges to the Ministry of Education in June, 1999. Accordingly, Ministry of Agriculture (BARR) handed over Dinajpur Agriculture College to the Ministry of Education on September 6, 1999 and thereafter the Prime Minister laid the foundation of Dinajpur Hajj Mohd Danesh Science and Technology University in the campus of Agriculture College. Patuakhali Agriculture College was also transferred to the Ministry of Education on October 17, 1999.

But Ministry of Education through an administrative order dated November 11, 1999, returned the said two agriculture colleges back to the Ministry of Agriculture for smooth running of financial, administrative and academic affairs of the institutions by the Ministry of Agriculture (BARR) till the full functioning of Dinajpur and Patuakhali Science and Technology Universities after the enactment of the respective University Laws. It is learnt that IPGMR under DG, health services was upgraded and made into a full-fledged Medical University after enactment of law even under the same Ministry of Health and Family Planning. It is very logical to run the Medical Varsity under the Ministry of Health along with attached hospital services for the public.

It is to be mentioned here that the Quadrate-Khuda Education Commission (1974), the present Education Policy Commission (1997) and the National Agriculture Commission (1999) formed by Awami League governments strongly recommended the establishment of six agriculture universities in six districts of the country by both establishing new ones and upgrading the existing agriculture colleges as the case may be. It is also learnt that the agriculture experts of the country

have strongly opposed the conversion of the said agriculture colleges into science and technology universities and also opposed the opening of agriculture faculty in the proposed science and technology universities. Bangladesh Agriculture Institute (BAI) former students' association under the leadership of its president Mr M M Zaman, former Agriculture Minister and Cabinet Secretary submitted memorandum to the Prime Minister on December 9, 1999 requesting her to review the recent government decision and urged upon the government to upgrade Dinajpur Hajj Mohd Danesh Agriculture College into Agriculture Universities in Rajshahi and Barisal divisions respectively. They have requested to establish a separate Technology University in separate campuses as per provision of the ECNEC-approved scheme in the greater Dinajpur and Patuakhali districts. They have further demanded to upgrade Bangladesh Agriculture Institute, Dhaka into Sher-e-Bangla Agriculture University and establish three new agriculture universities in Khulna, Chittagong and Sylhet divisions.

The agriculture experts further urged upon the PM to adopt the model of either American or Indian agriculture universities, integrating teaching, research, extension services and farmers' training, attached to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Moreover, conversion of Dinajpur Agriculture College into Science and Technology University will not help save land because the present 45 acres have been completely utilised for construction purposes to meet the requirement of Hajj Danesh Agriculture College as well as for the proposed Agriculture, faculty of Dinajpur Science and Tech Varsity. Similar situation prevails in the campus of Patuakhali Agriculture College. So it would be more logical to upgrade these two agriculture colleges into two separate agriculture varsities as it has been done in the case of Institute of Postgraduate Studies in Agriculture (IPSA) in greater Dhaka district (earlier) running into Bangladesh Agriculture Varsity, Sylhet Veterinary College may be upgraded as a University of Veterinary Medicine. Only a completely new agriculture varsity is to be

established in Khulna division (Jessore), while the oldest agriculture college in Dhaka is to be upgraded as Sher-e-Bangla Agriculture Varsity in Dhaka division.

Several agriculture experts opined that the proposed agriculture university of Chittagong division should be established in greater Noakhali district by using the campus and infrastructure of Noakhali Agriculture Training Institute, Begumganj as it was done by utilising the facilities of Dinajpur Agriculture Training Institute for establishment of Hajj Md Danesh Agriculture College in 1988.

In a meeting of Thakurgaon Science and Technology University and Dinajpur Hajj Md Danesh Agriculture University Implementation Committee, held on February 23, 2000 the demands of the BAI former Students Association to upgrade Hajj Danesh Agriculture College into Agriculture University were fully endorsed along with other demands as well. The meeting further reiterated its previous demand to establish the Science and Technology University as approved by ECNEC and committed to by the Prime Minister (February 28, 1999) for the greater Dinajpur district in the fallow lands of Thakurgaon Sugar Mills farms, for the advancement of scientific education and research in the backward greater Dinajpur district. Thakurgaon is most centrally located among the three districts of greater Dinajpur with good rail, road and air communications.

Thus the kind attention of the Prime Minister, Education Minister, Agriculture Minister, Science and Tech Minister, Planning Minister, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, Chairmen and members of the National Education Policy Committee (1997) and National Agriculture Commission (1999) and Chairman and members of UGC is drawn for favourable consideration of the suggestions for the advancement of agriculture education, research and extension service and science and technology education and research in the country.

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