

A Shift to CNG

A recent World Bank report that says black emission from two-stroke auto-rickshaw and tempo costs the country an annual loss of nearly 60 crore taka draws our attention once again to the ominous proportion air pollution in the urban areas, particularly in the capital city, has assumed. If the pollution level, the report goes on, could be lowered to that in other developing countries of the world, it would save 15,000 lives, and spare some 65 lakh people from serious ailment and 85 lakh more from minor ones.

Use of compressed natural gas (CNG) and liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) has been widely favoured as a way of reducing air pollution, given the fact that withdrawal of two-stroke engines from the road and their conversion into four-stroke ones cannot be done overnight. But the World Bank report sets forth another potent yet unheeded solution - proper maintenance and use of high quality lubricants at a prescribed rate for the two-stroke engines. We feel the World Bank prescription can work wonders in the short term. In the first place, it could bring about substantial reduction of black emission, thereby improving the air quality in the urban areas. On the other hand, it would certainly buy some time for research and development towards finding replacement of the two-stroke auto-rickshaw and tempo.

Although proven in the developed countries like Japan, in our context ensuring regulated use of lubricant and proper maintenance of the two-stroke engines could prove somewhat challenging. Our principal inadequacy is on the vigilance front that has allowed unhindered plying of flawed, unregistered and unlicensed vehicles.

That should not, however, discourage in any way the efforts invested in economical adaptation of two-stroke engines to consume CNG and LPG. The bottom-line is, air pollution in the urban areas has to be tackled in the right earnest. We know the source of lead emission and should devise means to eliminate it.

The people at the helm have their work cut out; enforce ban on leaded petrol, phase out two-stroke auto-rickshaw and tempo and, crucially, enhance vigilance network so that any violation in this regard is promptly detected and dealt with. Failure here means loss of lives, lowered productivity and eventually retarded nation and economy.

Gluts of Rice

OUR best hope for containing inflation and topping last year's GDP growth rate is pinned on managing well the good cereal harvests we reaped in the outgoing financial year. Sizable food crops by themselves are no guarantee for their steady availability at the market-price, stabilisation of grain prices and assured remunerative prices to the farmers. On the contrary, if the foodstuffs are not stored and preserved well, a lot of these would go waste reducing the level of supply thereby pushing the prices up as well. We now face such a predicament, one time too many, in actual fact, because when Aus was harvested stockpiles of Aman from the previous season at the godowns left little space for the former. The news is that there has been a long hold-up in the Irri-Boro procurement drive launched on paper a month and a half back solely because of dearth of space in the government godowns. The silos are brimming with previous stocks not to admit of any fresh intake so that the targeted procurement of four lakh tonnes of Irri-Boro crop this year stands hindered. As a result, there could be price depression with the farmers being deprived of fair price from the most important cash crop that Irri-Boro is.

We would like to recommend a three-pronged strategy to the government as a reasonably comprehensive solution to the problem of gluts. In the first place, the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) needs streamlining with food offtakes for development purpose falling in a steady pattern so that government silos have some space to accommodate new food arrivals. Secondly, the successive good harvests have shown the extent to where we need to enhance the storage capacity. The capacity-building should begin in earnest now. Finally, let the banks finance silo-building in the private sector with a provision for the government to hire some extra space there in case of acute need.

Stimulating Interaction

IT was indeed an interesting move to have a workshop on water-related issues, participated by students of the region, experts on the subject and teachers. The inadequacy or complete absence of material on water-related issues in the text books for school children of higher classes was criticised by the students and experts alike and a common demand for inclusion of this important subject was unanimously raised. The participants drawn from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh expressed the opinion that the text books published by boards are inadequate as regards content and suggested selection of books by writers across the region. It is true that with the passage of time a lot of changes and experiments have been made with subject matters and their presentations and in many areas incomplete and out-of-context studies were incorporated for the school children.

Experts expressed the opinion that students should learn more about their own rivers and their problems, particularly pollution, judicious use of water and dumping of chemical wastes in the waterbodies. An expert from Delhi Dr Ashis Nandy was critical of construction of dams in his country because of their resultant consequences and advocated use of indigenous knowhow instead of borrowing theories from abroad.

The South Asian Children Workshop on Alternative Water Management has been a step in the right direction. It promises to bring the future generations of the neighbouring countries together and give them the scope for developing mutual understanding and a chance to know and appreciate each other's problems. We hope similar regional meets will be organised in the best interest of children in South Asia.

CEC's Appointment and its Aftermath

Now that the CEC is appointed by the Government after a few days of waiting for a suggestion from the opposition, there seems little scope to undo the whole process. The main task that lies forward is to ensure fair-play by the incumbent. The electoral processes under which the anomalies grow should be reviewed.

wife appears as a dictator (not unlike in many families even in male dominated society), then the husband could be forced to ride on the second boat.

Besides this dictatorial solution, a compromise solution, comprising two parts, could be chalked out. First both agree to go to Sri Lanka but, at the same time, agree to eat Chinese. Second, both agree to go to Nepal but agree to have local food. Remember, in each of these cases, the husband and the wife agree to forsake one of their respective preferences in terms of either the location to visit or the food to eat. A "quasi" dictatorial solution would be either to go to Sri Lanka or to Nepal and choose food of one's own liking. This can be called a one-way-traffic solution and also be construed as non-dictatorial (democratic) but non-compromising (undemocratic) too: the wife goes to Nepal and eats Chinese while the husband leaves for Sri Lanka to eat local food.

The present political stalemate surrounding the choice of a CEC seems to fit both democratic and undemocratic routes

l.e. a separating solution and thus tends to demise the relationship between contending parties. There is also a problem with respect to the compromising solution, who will compromise: Khaleda or Hasina? The former is said to be a well-publicised 'uncompromising' leader by her party itself while the latter claims to be uncompromising.

blase one, a neutral election into a rigged one etc.

To both the ruling and the non-ruling parties in Bangladesh, it is alleged, democracy is what democracy is interpreted by them. This universal concept is now very much localised and pocketed to use it to pursue narrow party interest. If democracy would be

ingly, feels betrayed by the other side and therefore, marches towards a separating solution.

As citizens of the country, we would like to record our indignation of seeing one side going to Sri Lanka for having local food there while the other heading towards Nepal to eat Chinese. It may sound non-interfering, democratic but might cost the nation. Politics in a country is like a family life where despite the differences, family members need to eat, sit and chat around the dining table. Otherwise, the family ties are broken and children inevitably suffer the most. Do our political leaders want that people should suffer? Under the present situation each side is going home. Like a couple who got divorced because they couldn't agree either on what meal to cook or how to cook it, although they very much liked the house in which they live".

Both the ruling and the non-ruling parties of Bangladesh should invariably have a glimpse of the famous game-theory and more importantly,

of the example "the battle of the sexes".

Bangladesh is now passing through a severe political crisis which owes mainly to the "uncompromising" attitudes of our political leaders. As consequence of the stalemate, the economy is in a shambles, civic life is growingly in jeopardy. What is required most at the moment is embracing a compromise game where each of the party has to sacrifice a part of its preference package. It would be very unfortunate if politicians find that democracy in Bangladesh, for which they sacrificed so much in their lives, is in stake to make things tough for citizens' human rights.

Now that the CEC is appointed by the Government after a few days of waiting for a suggestion from the opposition, there seems little scope to undo the whole process. The main task that lies forward is to ensure fair-play by the incumbent. The electoral processes under which the anomalies grow should be reviewed. By and large, there should be a space to accommodate the resolution of conflicts. It happens in every country and should also happen in Bangladesh. For Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia the suggestion is to choose one menu and other's location or vice versa.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



misgiving on national interest as she deems it to be. The crux, however, could be clipped through a volley of steps viz, flipping a coin, voting bargaining etc. The decision as to the process of resolving the crisis emerges as more important than the outcome itself. In any of the process as mentioned above, there is a clear need of "some" trust and faith on the opponent. Lack of faith might turn an unbiased flip into a

preached and practised with all of its original novelty. Bangladesh could perhaps be a few yards forward by this time. The ruling party continues to allege that the opposition parties are poised to pasture on un-constitutional means and are up to stall the socio-economic progress of the country. The opposition, on the other hand, tend to reconfirm their solution through a caretaker government. Each of the sides, seem-

Will Indian Voters Turn to Congress and Sonia Gandhi?

What the Congress needs is to revitalise the organisation, with Sonia taking a realistic view of the situation by developing closer links with the "third front" parties, and jettisoning the impression of "dynastic rule" as far as possible.

INDIRA Gandhi imposed the controversial state of emergency in India 25 years ago. The national elections, that followed them, saw the political organisation which spearheaded the independence movement of India in tatters. The Indian National Congress lost power for the first time in 1977 in the independent India. And the party's driving force, Indira Gandhi, who was riding the crest of tremendous popularity in the aftermath of Bangladesh's independence war and who had established herself as an astute leader in the world, suffered ignominious setback in the polls. She lost the Raj Bareilly seat in Uttar Pradesh to Janata Party's Raj Narain while her younger son Sanjay lost the nearby Amethi constituency to a relatively obscure politician.

The Janata Party - a conglomeration of different organisations came together by sheer desperation to dislodge the Congress from power - formed the first non-Congress government with Morarji Desai as the prime minister and Atal Behari Vajpayee as external affairs minister. While the former came from the "Old Guards" of the Congress, the latter came from the "Janasangh". They all merged with the Janata party.

But Indira Gandhi and the Congress did not take much time to strike back. The Janata Party government collapsed in January 1980 election and the Congress came back to power with more than two-thirds majority. Indira Gandhi was assassinated before she could complete her term. Sanjay had already died in a plane crash, and it was left to Rajiv to step into the shoes of her mother in continuing the dynastic trend in the Congress politics. Rajiv too was killed in 1991. His death robbed the new Congress government of his leadership

but the party remained in power till it was defeated in the elections in 1995 with P.V. Narasimha Rao's leadership.

The Congress has been devoid of charismatic leadership since then. The partymen persuaded Rajiv's wife - Italian-born Sonia Gandhi - to enter the political scene. The Congress heavily relies on Nehru family linkage in the politics. Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and her two sons Sanjay and Rajiv - all played their innings in the Indian politics. The only option to maintain the trend was Sonia since Rajiv's daughter Priyanka and son Rahul were still not mature enough to wear the mantle. Sonia was hesitant but later threw her hat into the ring and is now the president of Congress party and also the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha. The questions that revolve around politics of India, and the Congress and Sonia Gandhi in particular, are: does the Congress stand a chance to return to power and how is Sonia Gandhi conducting the party? Has Sonia succeeded in fending the disadvantages that stem from her being a foreigner? What is the state of the Congress now vis-a-vis the ruling NDA and the other parties like the CPM, CPI, Samajwadi Party and others? And finally, what do the Indians and also the Congressmen feel about Sonia Gandhi's qualities and her chances of taking the organisation to political ascendancy? Will it come to power again?

Most Congressmen seem to be smarting under a kind of frustration about the party's possibility of regaining power. The first salvo was fired recently by senior party leader and a former general secretary V.N. Gadgil, who is sceptical about the effectiveness of Sonia's leadership and current capability of the Congress to make a serious dent in the Indian politics to the extent of emerging as the only viable alternative to NDA. Without showing any disrespect to the last of the leaders of Nehru dy-

nasty and without diminishing her sincerity for the sake of the party and the country, he feels that Congress has an uphill task. Some others have echoed the same, and one went to the extent of saying that he finds little chance for the organisation to return to power in 50 years with current state of leadership. Obviously, all these indicate that many things are not fine in the party which is in the grip of some kind of despondency.

Sonia Gandhi came in the scene when the Congress leadership was in doldrums following the election debacle that led to Narasimha Rao's resignation from the top position which, however, was occupied by lacklustre Sitaram Kesri. Sonia took over just before the national polls but could not provide the organisation the much-needed "magic touch" although Congressmen as a whole were

rejuvenated since they became emotional with Nehru dynasty. However, Sonia is not exactly from the dynasty, she is a member of the family by virtue of marriage. Party stalwarts like Sharad Pawar, Tariq Anwar and A. P. Sagna have quit protesting that a "foreigner" is gaining the domination. In the elections that followed after the collapse of the earlier NDA government, Sonia contested in it and came out victorious, but the

party secured only 116 seats. It was the lowest ever number of seats the Congress bagged since 1947. Before the polls last year, Sonia came close to becoming prime minister and taking the party to power because the NDA government had lost the confidence motion by only one vote. She told the ceremonial president of the country that she was supposed to enjoy the support of 272 members in the 543-member Lok Sabha needed to form a government but eventually she failed to muster support of that "magic number". It was her failure to reach understanding with the secular forces like the Samajwadi Party in the UP and the leftists in the West Bengal and the result was midterm polls. Had she succeeded in rally-

ing the support of all secular forces which was not too difficult at that stage, the Congress with the support of others would have come to power and possibly remained at the helm today. But it did not occur mainly because Sonia could not play her cards adroitly and she could not finally make it. This raised serious doubts about her leadership skills and ability to hold over the MPs of different parties many of whom are capricious but were willing to support her at one stage.

Evidently, Sonia, being not an original Indian, has several inherent problems like the language which she is desperately trying to learn. The Congress has been reduced to a precarious position in some states including the West Bengal where it is not even the second largest force and the situation is disappointing for its supporters. Besides, there seem to be distinct coterries within the organisation and the high command seldom works in unison and there is also the tendency to mislead the party chief. Senior leaders Arjun Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, Madhav Rao Sindhia, Golam Nabi Azad and others have inter rivalries which also existed before Indira or Rajiv could handle it well. For Sonia, a newcomer in the politics, it is difficult to know and tackle the nitty-gritty of the political pattern in India. The net result is what is reflected in the remarks of Mr. Gadgil and some other leaders. But Sonia's victory with a big margin from the Amethi constituency and also

the comfortable win from another seat in the south confirmed her acceptance by Indian people as a politician. However, whether they are keen to see her as prime minister remains a moot point and only time can say if she has earned this confidence of Indian people.

The Congress is passing through a tough time when it has to confront the challenges in several fronts. Sonia Gandhi has to fight a charismatic leader like Atal Behari Vajpayee on one hand and manage own party affairs on the other. Even in secular camps, she has adversaries both among the conservatives and leftists, who, however, have shown a great degree of understanding about her. True, the CPM, the main communist party and its leader West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu have come closer to the Congress but Sonia in a way failed to earn their confidence when she was lukewarm to concede the likely premiership to the leftist leader after her own efforts had run into rough weather.

The Indian national Congress is in the midst of a critical time as the Congressmen themselves are worried about their political future. But the traditionally vast party cannot be washed off and it definitely can feel to stage a comeback to power although no chance exists at the moment for fresh polls and the NDA looks largely set for full term despite occasional bickering among the constituents. What the Congress needs is to revitalise the organisation, Sonia taking a realistic view of the situation by developing closer links with the "third front" parties, and jettisoning the impression of "dynastic rule" as far as possible.

MATTERS AROUND US Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

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OPINION

Lecture by Rajmohan Gandhi

AD Khan

In the front page of your daily of 10th April, 2000 it was published that Mr Rajmohan Gandhi, a distinguished visitor to Bangladesh and a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi gave an hour-long lecture on "The continuing relevance of Gandhi ideas for social action in South Asia" at CIRDP Auditorium, Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) and Proshika, an NGO, organised the lecture followed by open discussion and questions from different leaders. Asked about a move by Abul Hashem and others to stage off the division of Bengal, Rajmohan Gandhi said, as far as he studied, Mahatma Gandhi did not find any popular support for it. He (Mahatma Gandhi) was also keen to ensure right of minorities on both sides. "He was not opposed to united independent Bengal. But Jinnah did not want it. Also many leaders of both Congress and Muslim League did not support the idea of united independent Bengal", he said.

My objection lies against the last sentences under the inverted coma as quoted above. It is not true that Mr Jinnah did not want it. In support of Jinnah's positive attitude towards united Bengal concept, I quote a few lines from "Freedom at Midnight" by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre: "Mountbatten had inserted in the plan a clause which would allow an Indian province to become independent if a majority of both its communities wished to. That clause was intended to provide that the sixty five million Hindus and Muslims of Bengal could join into one viable country with the great support of Calcutta as their capital. The idea had been placed before Mountbatten by Calcutta's Muslim leader, Shaheed Suhrawardy. The Viceroy liked it. Contrasted to Jinnah's aberrant two headed state, it seemed an entirely likely to endure. To his surprise, he had discovered Bengal's Congress Hindu leaders intrigued by the project. He had quietly encouraged their interest. He had even

ponents, advocating independent national status for united Bengal. With Bengal enjoying the virtual world monopoly of jute and having Calcutta's highly developed international port, Suhrawardy sought British as well as American capital to develop his 'Nation's' economic potential. 'We have common mother tongue and common economic interests', Suhrawardy argued. 'Bengal has very little affinity with the Punjab. Bengal will be an independent state and decide by herself later whether she should link up with Pakistan. Jinnah would have welcomed the emergence of an independent, united Bengal with open arms, but Nehru and Patel considered it an anathema to Congress and Indian interests and ever refused that unified Bangladesh led by a Muslim premier, would form closer alliance to Pakistan than India' (page 320).

I can quote from several other books also specially from Memoirs of H S Suhrawardy by M H R Talukder (page 27-32) and Jinnah/Pakistan New Thought by Sailesh K. Bondopadhyay (page 276-279-281) and some more in my support. But I defer with the wish that the above quotations would be considered enough.

I like to conclude by saying that Mahatma Gandhi was the greatest leader ever produced and had world-wide reputation. Prof. Einstein remarked in his condolence message that "Future generation would refuse to believe that such a human being ever treaded this earth." Nevertheless, the fact remains that with all his political acumen, far-sightedness and dedication he could not save India from partition by controlling the Congress stalwarts and by withholding his blessings even to Cabinet Mission Plan which was the last resort to that end. Thus, his precisely maintained creed of non-violence, perhaps, as I feel, crashed at the gate of horribly violent incidents that followed with unbelievable vengeance, loot, plunder and killings for which no patience is too great.

To the Editor ...

English medium schools

Sir, So far enough have been written on this sullen issue however yielding no result from any quarter. In a society like ours, such muteness or apathy toward a common cause doesn't take me by surprise anyhow. At least, when we see far more pressing or burning issues failing to generate enough public outcry or call for a remedy. The so-called English medium schools have always been my cause of concern from the day one of my son's schooling.

Leave alone the rip-off, unjustified school fees that we dish out every month to fill the coffers of 'school traders' along with it come charges and fees in every disguise too often to dent our already dented pockets. Ceremoniously fleecing off the parents begin right from every January session, when these schools start charging you admission fees, new session fees, school development fees, and so forth. They prescribe your kids' textbooks that are often out of the local market or menacingly waited upon to be sent from India. Most books that are found here are counterfeit done by semi-literate copy-art printers, where you have smudgy printing that are not readable even with magnifiers (or be at the mercy of eye specialists again)! But the school authorities give a damn about it.

Now a days I even find these schools contracting British Council to teach our wards English language through BC's set exams, and they are as a mandatory doing this, levying us a huge sum without even discussing with us. Wonder why these schools are for then?

These 'school traders', cashing in on poor or no governing ment monitoring at all, have been enjoying quite a heyday. And hapless, poor parents like us send their wards to these school-like centers where money minting seem to be the only cardinal objective and we

are barely left with any other choice.

How I wish some divine force had showered some justice and wisdom on this country, at least once.

Mushtaque Ahmed Development Consultant 17, Lake Circus Dhaka

BD left smarting by Indian Internet leap

Sir, The news item in the Business page of the Daily Star (1.6.2000) on the mushrooming of ISPs (Internet Service Provider) in India was a welcome jar to our own Internet culture. We are still a lot behind in terms of infrastructure and setting up of a suitable environment for promoting Internet usage. I am sure we can also justify a much higher number of local ISPs and plunging on-line costs. It is interesting to note how, right after privatisation; charges in India came down to around 25 paisa per minute. And here we currently have charges around 10 to 12 times higher! It is high time that our IT planners brought to their hi-tech projects a bit of practicality and accessibility for the people of Bangladesh.

A conscious Internet user Dhaka

Will the situation ever change?

Sir, How long will we have to see heart-rending photographs in the newspapers where distraught relatives are seen weeping over the dead bodies of their dear ones? On May 26, 2000, we had to see another photograph of that sort. It was of a young businessman, Iftekhar Ahmed Shipu who was murdered at the UAE market of Banani on May 25, 2000, shot from close range. Now a days, these sort of in-

cidents have become very common in our country but the government seems totally indifferent to it. Will it go on like this, while the government remains busy with unnecessary projects like cutting trees of Chandrima Uddyan at the dead of night for building power substation for the NAM convention center?

Regarding Shipu murder case what is all the more painful and frustrating is those who are alleged to be involved in the killing have not been arrested till date. Is it because one of the accused is the son of a ruling party MP?

It is really frustrating to note that our policemen are expert in arresting innocent persons and they seem to be very knowledgeable about when to act and when not.

Nir Jahan Chittagong

Dearer calls to dearer people

Sir, The recent decision of cellular telephone operator Sheba Telecom to raise its unit call rate to a 30-second slot is sure to send waves of concern through thousands of users. Telephone bills will no doubt soar considerably as the time frame for one call unit has been doubled. For example under the new system, if I make a 1 minute 10 second call it would cost me 6 taka; under the older system it would cost me 5 taka. So I am charged, in effect, 4 call units of the previous system and 2 taka where it might have cost me one taka in the older system - and that is just double!

The reason Sheba gave was another dubious one - why these sudden 'problems' in the billing system after more than 2 years? This measure can only have contradictory effects on customer-company relations.

A worried subscriber Dhaka