The Daily Star

Founder-Editor : Late S. M. Ali

Dhaka, Friday, July 7 , 2000

Playing Football with Dhaka's Development Concerns

MOST of the ills of Dhaka city seem rooted in the fact that we have eschewed all planned approaches to her development agenda with consummate ease and passion for opportunism. More than the absence of plans it is the lack of their implementation which characterises the tentativeness we have always displayed about the city's development needs. Turning a blind eye to the haphazard growth of the city amounted to no ordinary kind of stoic indifference. On the contrary this seems to have been actuated by purely selfish motives of a handful given to bending the law at the drop of a hat, what if Dhaka city becomes a concrete jungle stewing in its own heat of noxious fumes?

Dhaka City has had two Master Plans, one dating back to 1954 when it was a provincial capital with Madani as the chairman of the then Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT); and the other one, a product of four years' hard work since 1993 got adopted in 1997 through a gazette notification.

The second Master Plan could be considered as an updated version of the previous one quite markedly designed to chime in with the status of Dhaka as the capital of independent Bangladesh. But the fact of the matter is, we allowed the city to develop from 1971 to 1997, albeit most chaotically, without the benefit and guidance of any master plan whatsoever. What a pity?

As if this was not enough of a lapse, we made it a point to have 'discretionary powers' vested in Rajuk Chairmen to 'overrule the master plan'.

The second Master Plan, just to gauge how much we are losing out through an attitude of indifference to it, has had three important elements: first is the structural content said to be valid between 1995 and 2015; second one is the urban area planning having to do with improvement of built-up areas, valid again from 1995 to 2015; and the third aspect relates to detailed area planning including zoning with an eye to proper land use and management of environment.

Why must a master plan prepared by local and foreign experts be allowed to be fiddled or tinkered with by any Rajuk chairmen? We think it is the abuse of so-called discretionary powers by successive Rajuk chairmen that has been the bane of Dhaka city. Approval of building plans in sites designated for open spaces, parks or lakes in the master plan has been a pastime with Rajuk chairmen. Mostly they felt impelled to accord it under pressure from politico-monetary elites or they did it themselves as an act of favouritism. Even the land allocational and grabbing scandals owe their origin to the impunity with which the master plan could be flouted by those who are supposed to be its defenders and implementers.

It is understood that the authorities are thinking of divesting the Rajuk Chairman of his 'discretionary powers to overrule the master plan' and making these over to the Minister for Housing and Public Works. Does it not mean one and the same thing. Who can guarantee that those powers would not be abused by the minister as well?

We want to see the master plan as an immutable product, not a plaything for any official functionary or a minister. Update it or enrich it if you must, but don't let it be a pawn in the hands of greedy people who give three hoots to the concept of modern, balanced and majority-serving urban development.

Sportsmen's Achievements and its Politicisation

All were well and spicy till our attainment of glory as a Test cricket country. Then came the somewhat disappointing episode. The victory celebrations that were organized to mark the occasion appeared to be exclusively a ruling party affair. Even the cricketers themselves were practically ignored.

Currents and Crosscurrents

by M M Rezaul Karim

THE attainment of Test status by Bangladesh cricket on the red-lettered day of 26 June is an important landmark in the annals of the history of sports in the country. This represented a befitting recognition of all those sportsmen who have attained the highest glory for themselves in one of the top and prestigious fields of sports through sheer dedication, perseverance and dogged determination. This also elevated the nation to a lofty level in the international field and made it a member of the small but exclusive club of Test cricket. Besides the cricketers themselves whom we salute with pride, the credit is shared also by all those people, who over the past decades made relentless efforts and successfully overcame numerous obstacles to reach the position as it finally did.

A brief resume of the history of development of cricket in our country would reveal how within a short span of time our amateur players have been able to train and equip themselves, often in adverse situation, to enable themselves to reach the pinnacle of glory in this elegant sports, which had been generally neglected earlier in our country. Pakistan, started receiving world acclaim and made its place firmly secured in the cricket world as early as in the fifties, about half a century ago. The reasons were obvious. In the then West Pakistan, which housed numerous cadet and public schools as well as similar other sophisticated educational institutions after British fashion, cricket was a popular game. In the then East Pakistan about the same time this game was hardly played seriously, not to speak of being popular. The step-motherly attitude of the Central government to the socio-economic progress in East Pakistan throughout the period was bitterly known to all and the field of sports was no exception. Among sports, the greatest victim was perhaps the cricket.

With the emergence of Bangladesh many thought that the neglected sports sector would receive the attention it deserved. But this did not happen. No worthwhile steps were taken to encourage sports and provide facilities necessary for building Bangladeshi national teams of desired standard in any game to be able to participate successfully in competitions even at regional level. Cricket figured out, in terms of priority, as perhaps the last in the list of the first Awami League government. Cricket was confined only to a small section of the people and considered to be a game of the bourgeoisie. Even, no Cricket Board was set up in Bangladesh until in 1974.

Encouragement to sports became perceptible with the commencement of Zia's rule and this was meticulously followed during the Ershad regime. A number of sports stadiums were built during this period; the Ministry of Sports was activated and efforts were made to gear it to fulfil the long-felt need of the nation in this neglected sector. Khaleda Zia's regime provided a boost in this direction and found in her late Foreign Minister ASM Mustafizur Rahman an active patron of sports, especially of cricket. He was not only President of the Bangladesh Cricket Board but he devoted substantial time in encouraging and promoting the cause of cricket in the country. It was he who first declared that Bangladesh would eventually win international trophy in cricket.

By the time the present Awami League regime came to power the state of cricket as a national game has not only been accorded its due recognition but was already imbedded in the society. All over the country, cricket in all its forms, from the rudimentary to the professional, was being played by children and the youth of all ages. Our heroic cricketers meanwhile put all their time, energy and meagre resources into practicing themselves as real good players. The outcome came in the form of the laurel for the Bangladeshi team with the victory of the international cricket trophy in 1997. Bangladesh's place in the cricket world was made secure. Than came the bid for raising Bangladesh's affiliated status of membership of the International Cricket Council to that of full country membership in order to be a owner of the key to the exclusive club of the Test cricket. The abortive attempt last year for the same was finally crowned with success with the attainment of the glory of receiving the honour with unanimous votes cast by all the Nine Test member-countries. President and General Secretary of the Bangladesh Cricket Board, no doubt, also made due contribution in this regard through their skill and perseverance.

The sports since the past few decades have occupied in the minds of the people of our country a well-deserved prominent place. Traditionally, it was study and formal education which was juxtaposed in a superior scale over games and sports. Till the beginning of our generation the perennial advice of parents to their children was to devote more time to studies and to frugally indulge in games and sports, which was, with some exceptions, generally looked down upon as sheer waste of time. The outlook has since undergone a fundamental change. Sports have now figured into a valued and much desired profession in the society, as skilled and eminent sportsmen not only earn fame but also a good deal of money as remuneration. Parents are no longer much reluctant to allow their children to spend more time in games in which they exhibit some degree of promise.

In a totalitarian society promising sportsmen or athletes are identified from their very childhood. They are then groomed carefully and given all possible and required facilities, including financial, so that they can become players or athletes of international standard. In a rich capitalistic society the patronage does not come from the state, at least not in the initial stage, but from the family, the society and later, with the manifestation of due promise, from clubs, foundations and philanthropic organisations. Money and resources generate more than proportionately with the increase in the skill and fame of a sportsman. In our country, we are devoid of these facilities both from the state and the public, except at a very late stage. But to reach that stage, our sportsmen really have to traverse through a long and arduous struggle. People must implore the state and those who are patrons of sports and games to come forward with a scheme to identify promising sports people at an early age and provide them with the requisite training and facilities so that they can serve themselves and the nation appropriately. Bangladesh needs more sports grounds and stadiums. Isn't it a pity that we have no exclusive cricket stadium and that Test cricketers have to play in the main football stadium in Dhaka!

All were well and spicy till our attainment of glory as a Test cricket country. Then came the somewhat disappointing episode. The victory celebrations that were organized to mark the occasion appeared to be exclusively a ruling party affair. Even the cricketers themselves were practically ignored. The Test status was branded as an achievement of the Awami League government after professing the claim that nothing had been done in the field of sports and cricket in the preceding 25 years. This particular obsession of casting aside the political parties who, added together, represent a majority of the people of the country, became apparent and was exhibited on other occasions also. To welcome the victorious players winning the international trophy in 1997 the Prime Minister also addressed a public rally in which no opposition political parties were invited. The crowning example was set by her on the occasion of inauguration of the longest bridge on river Jamuna when she ignored the widespread pleas to invite leaders of the Jatiya Party and the BNP, who had practically initiated the project and constructed its major part respectively. She sought to publicise it as a sole achievement of the Awami League and named it in a way to propagate that claim. But the Prime Minister should be aware that such ill-devised methods of propaganda, contrary to her belief, tarnishes the image of her party and in no way enhances it.

The author, a former Ambassador, is a Member of BNP's Advisory Council.

Tut! Tut! Our Movies are Smut!

The problem lies elsewhere. The ultimate goal of most investors is to launder their ill-gotten money in the film industry, while indulging in the additional lures of its sordid side. Oscar Wilde claimed that life imitated art more than art imitated life. When our movies are rising from the depth of that squalor, it no longer matters which is what. Whether movies imitate our lives or our lives imitate movies, how can we separate the filth of one from that of another?

Crosstalk

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan

WHEN Haji Selim MP spoke last week, many people listened and even many times more people read about it in the newspapers on the following day. The juggernaut member criticised our movies in the parliament and contended that their quality had gone atrociously bad. Take the title of the two movies he mentioned in the parliament. Those names sound like some scatological phrases expressing grotesque minds gone utterly grotty. Shakespeare asks in *Romeo and Juliet* if there is anything in a name because a rose called in any other name will smell just as sweet. But that is not how it works in the real world where a tree named bitter does not bear a fruit named sweet.

How does it explain why our movies are so bad, why their plots and characters are nothing but jumbled confusion of buffoonery and bawdiness? Take any movie of the day, and you will find how a skimpy story line is stretched by absurd elements of sex and violence. Now like a stab in the wound come the obscene titles to destroy the last relic of sobriety in movie production. If you look at the billboard on the marquee of a movie theatre, you will find how gun-toting and knife-clashing men figure in the concourse of flesh-showing women, all captioned by a tasteless title to give you the preview to a cultural hell.

But where does that hell begin? Does it begin in the minds of the cine-goers or does it begin in the minds of the cine-makers? That seems to bring us to the age-old question of which came first: chicken or egg? The answer is that art is to culture what lightening is to thunder: one is precursor to another. Thus art is the genesis of a culture and culture is the germination of art. It is said that the Renaissance might have been expected to appear first in Rome, if not for its political situation being very unfavourable to artistic endeavour. Instead it appeared in Florence, which was economically prosperous and politically stable under the leadership of the Medici family.

So, art leads culture and culture lifts people. The artist conceives himself, in the words of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, as the "unacknowledged legislator of the world", an autonomous, godlike creator of new orders of reality obedient only to his perceptions and the categories of his mind. One can say that artist creates the reality, which shapes the culture. In the year 1401, a competition was held among sculptors and goldsmiths to design a pair of doors for the old baptistery at Florence. The sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti won, and a losing goldsmith, Filippo Brunelleschi, turned to the study of architecture. Brunelleschi investigated ancient Roman architecture and acquired the knowledge of classical architecture and ornament that he used as a foundation for Renaissance architecture.

Where do we place the tawdry banalities of our movies in this symbiosis of art and culture? Are they work of art, or bulwarks of culture? They are perhaps neither. How can subliminal plots of lewdness and mayhem carrying unseemly titles embellish the creative forces of a society? How can profanities engender profundity in the inane energy of misguided art?

And more often than not the buck is passed to the viewers who may or may not know the difference between artfulness and art. For the matter, there has been controversy over what constitutes cinematic art. In the United States after World War II, "art houses" were set up to define it for sophisticated audiences in large cities, screening primarily European films, such as those directed by Fellini, Bergman, Bunuel, and Antonioni. Also, 16-millimetre films were distributed to museums and college campuses to spark interest in avant-garde films.

The line between a mass audience that seeks entertainment and a smaller group that is consciously concerned with artistic values goes back to 1920. The films that appeal to these two groups, however, vary from one nation to another and from one period to another. The Hollywood comedies by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and others, for example, were originally popular entertainment but were later taken up by the art film audience. The comedies of Jerry Lewis received little serious critical attention in their native United States but a great deal in France.

Thus the quality of movies, like that of most other commodities, depends on the choice of consumers all right. But it also needs the commitment of producers. In 1951 Daiei films of Japan, which generally produced cheap domestic genre motion pictures, reserved a portion of its budget to make lavish historical spectacles, such as Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953), that would appeal to the art audience outside of Japan. In 1926 William Fox paid Murnau $1,000,000 to relocate in Hollywood in the hopes that he would make the greatest movies the world had yet seen. It remains the Holy Grail of our film movement that increased government grants are essential for the production of good movies. While movies were made with government grants in the past, have they helped us with the taste buds of our viewers? In fact, occasional work of art is no more relevant for the artistic sensibility of a nation than improved diet on the Independence Day is for the health of prisoners.

The problem, therefore, lies elsewhere. The ultimate goal of most investors is to launder their ill-gotten money in the film industry, while indulging in the additional lures of its sordid side. Oscar Wilde claimed that life imitated art more than art imitated life. When our movies are rising from the depth of that squalor, it no longer matters which is what. Whether movies imitate our lives or our lives imitate movies, how can we separate the filth of one from that of another?

Does Haji Selim know about the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, which states that the more precisely one of the quantities is measured, the less precisely the other is known? Our lives and movies have mashed together in a terrible depravity where art and life have infiltrated each other. Do we take up on the movies and hope to change our lives? Or, do we do it other way around? Maybe, a good way to start is to realise that endurance is more important than entertainment in life as well as in art.

Friday Mailbox

JS attendance

Sir, I appreciate the bold stance of Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury at the Jatiya Sangsad in challenging the ruling of the Speaker that an opposition member must sign the attendance register. Further more, I admire the BNP member from Chittagong for pointing out that "no parliament in the world has the practice of compulsory signing the attendance register" and for not signing the attendance register during his stay in the House.

In this connection, it would be worthwhile to mention that only the staff of government and non-government offices are required to sign attendance registers to prove their presence, but a parliament member's status, I believe, is much higher than them.

Instead of making it mandatory for the opposition MPs to sign the attendance register, the Speaker could have instructed the officials of the Jatiya Sangsad to write down the names of the opposition MPs who attended the Parliament after a long absence.

K Rahman
Road#11(new), Dhanmondi
Dhaka

Khulna Newsprint Mill

Sir, The report published on KNM in your esteemed daily on 26th June, 2000 is no doubt a truth but not the whole truth. During the current financial year, i. e. 1999-2000, the Khulna Newsprint Mill incurred a loss of over Taka fifty crore due to mismanagement, labour unrest, corruption etc. Its usual source of raw materials is Sundarbans. But as the bio diversity problem takes a crucial turn, it will not be possible to get raw materials in near future from Sundarbans. So there is no point in keeping the Mill alive through artificial respiration under pressure from trade union only to sustain huge losses. The taxpayers are paying through their noses to serve the interest of some corrupt officials and trade union leaders. Cost of imported newsprint will be lot cheaper than the cost of locally produced newsprint. Will the Prime Minister's office, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Industries look into the matter?

Dilruba Chwodhury
Uttara

Careless scooter drivers

Sir, Now-a-days, it is often noticed that the scooter drivers are sitting on the driving seats by folding and resting their left legs on the seats and driving in this position which is very dangerous. I am sure that this kind of sitting while driving is against the traffic rule.

A driver must take his driving seat very smartly, carefully and firmly to face any difficult situation while driving. If a driver seats in a very relaxed and casual manner and treat his vehicle as a toy, he is not only violating traffic rule but also putting the passenger's life in danger.

From my personal experience, I can assure that the countries where three wheelers like ours ply, the drivers are very cautious and careful about their sitting position while driving. Police are also cautious to prevent any unwanted incident due to the driver's carelessness.

As a conscious citizen, I would like to attract the attention of the traffic authority and request to take necessary steps against such carelessness.

Saber Hossain
35/B, Bijoy Nagar, Dhaka

Reduction in interest rates

Sir, In the National Budget for the year 2000-2001, our Finance Minister has proposed reduction in the interest rates on the various government savings instruments through restructuring. It has been pleaded that due to high rate of profit on the government savings instruments, banking and financial sectors are facing difficulties in mobilising savings, which would be used for investment in and growth of the industrial sector. This argument is not at all logical and acceptable, as the failure of the banking sector in mobilising savings and providing loans to industries is due primarily to mismanagement of the resources/savings by the banks as well as huge government borrowing from the banking system. The huge amount of liquid money in the bank also does not corroborate Finance Minister's statement. Besides, it is least understood how the reduction in interest rates on the saving instruments would automatically induce and enhance bank savings. On the contrary, the proposed drastic reduction of the interest rates on saving instruments will: a) defeat the original purpose of such savings instruments, b) seriously affect the income of the incumbent, many of whom are pension holders who live solely on this income, c) discourage new savings using these instruments.

Under the circumstances, it is suggested that the rate of interest-cut on the savings instruments as proposed by the Finance Minister should be reconsidered and reduced rationally, so that it safeguards the interest of all concerned. The kind attention of the Members of the Parliament and the concerned authorities are drawn to the above issue.

R I Khan
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

Beef up the traffic system

Sir, The recent Budget was apathetic to the urgent need of strengthening some government departments and agencies to cope with the heavy work loads experienced during the last few years; for example, some severe problems created due to the rapid urbanisation movements adversely affecting the major cities.

Dhaka traffic police's helplessness was revealed in the DS story of July 2— working at half the needed staff strength. While belatedly, the bulldozers are in action to combat the callousness of Rajuk and DCC, the huge number of unauthorised vehicles in Dhaka city cannot be bulldozed. Even there is no mechanism to prosecute thousands of traffic violations.

The DCC have also to augment its understrength workforce to provide a certain degree of adequate service in the metropolis. The Chittagong port needs an iron-hand administration, but the intransigent labour unions (more than two dozen defiant CBAs) are holding sway and sniping at the heavy port traffic. The potential foreign investors naturally feel uncertain.

The centre has to provide more than moral support—help more as a facilitator. It is a pity that during the closing year of governance, the political focus tends to shift from public interest to party interest.

Abul M Ahmad
Dhaka

Views expressed in this column are the writers' own. The Editor may or may not subscribe to those views. The Editor reserves the right to decide which letters should be published.

Human Development Rating for Bangladesh

What Does it Mean?

by Manzoor Ahmed

As Bangladesh approaches another general election and takes weary steps towards building democratic institutions and a democratic culture, the theme of human development through strengthening democracy has a particular resonance.

MUCH attention has been focussed on the report that Bangladesh ranks lowest among the SAARC countries in the rating on human development index (HDI) according to Human Development Report 2000, released by UNDP on 29 June. Bangladesh's position in the world league table actually improved slightly from number 150 in 1999 to number 146 this year.

Evidently, Bangladesh's neighbours in South Asia also made progress in respect of human development index. Consequently, Bangladesh's relative position remained unchanged. The index is a composite measure that combines values for life expectancy at birth, educational attainment (represented by adult literacy rate and the average years of schooling of the population), and an adjusted value of per capita income. HDI is designed to represent a proxy measure of national development reflecting the well-being of people rather than per capita GNP, the conventional indicator of development which is an aggregate economic measure. Other factors such as people's participation, overcoming gender discrimination, increasing civil and political freedoms and success in alleviating poverty have been identified as key elements of human development and presented in past reports. These factors, however, are not taken into account directly in the construction of the human development index.

It is possible, as the Minister of State for Planning, Dr. Mohiuddin Alamgir claimed, that the rating did not take account of recent statistics, such as the very rapid improvement in adult literacy statistics, being reported periodically by the government. HDR 2000 shows the adult literacy rate of Bangladesh for the year 1998 for the population aged 15 years and above to be 40 per cent (28.6 per cent for females and 50.1 per cent for males.) By comparison, the Ministry of Education claims that the combined rate for males and females has now reached 60 per cent as a result of the Total Literacy Movement. Many knowledgeable observes laud the intention and the effort of the government in adult literacy, but are skeptical about the statistics reporting rapid rise in literacy rate and the declarations about "illiteracy-free" districts. Questions about validity of official literacy statistics arise because of the very nature of literacy as a skill, the requirements of an effective programme and the conditions necessary for acquiring sustainable literacy skills. But that is another story.

Another recent UNDP report titled Overcoming Human Poverty notes that South Asia (except Sri Lanka) has failed to reverse the trend of increase in the absolute number of people living in poverty. The annual average increase of population living in poverty in a decade from mid-80s to mid-90s has been 0.8 per cent in Bangladesh. This increase has been at about double the rate of Bangladesh in India (1.9 per cent) and Pakistan (1.4 per cent) and almost four times in Nepal (3.1 per cent). This by no means is a reason for complacency or satisfaction, but it throws a different light on the poverty alleviation efforts of the countries in the region, not reflected in HDR 2000.

This is not to suggest that the league table rating of HDR 2000 is inconsequential. It does show, for example, that several countries in the world with per capita income level close to that of Bangladesh (reported as US$ 348 for 1998) are doing much better than Bangladesh in human development. Examples include Vietnam (per capita income $ 331, HDI rank 108); Tajikistan (per capita income $ 345, HDI rank 110); Ghana (per capita income $ 399, HDI rank 129); and Madagascar (per capita income $ 238, HDI rank 141). HDR 2000 also puts Bangladesh among the group of 35 countries, which is the lowest among three groups in human development ranking. A small consolation may be drawn from the fact that 29 countries in the world have a lower rank than that of Bangladesh.

The most important and relevant message for Bangladesh from HDR 2000, however, has received scant attention in media reports. This message is about the inextricable link between human development and human rights—the theme of HDR 2000. This message has also not been highlighted in the presentations made on the occasion of the launch of the report in Dhaka. The report proclaims that "any society committed to improving the lives of its people must also be committed to full and equal rights for all its citizens." The report underlines that elections and similar trappings of democracy are not enough to promote human development. The report advocates a model of "inclusive democracy" that protects citizens from "the brute electoral force of the majority." The principal coordinator of the report, Dr. Richard Jolly, said, "with the establishment of more than 100 multi-party democracies in the last 20 years in the global wave of freedom, bullying and bullets have been giving way to the ballot box. Now it is time to build on that foundation."

Inclusive democracy embraces all minorities, explains the report. It is based on the dispersal and sharing of political power. The rituals of elections are not enough, if the rule of law is not vigorously and consistently upheld and large sections of the population, especially women, continue to face discrimination. The report presents a 10-point agenda for "advancing rights through strengthening democracy." The agenda have to be implemented through leadership and supportive actions by national legislatures, judiciary, executive authorities, NGOs, media, academics, the business sector and international organizations. The agenda inter alia call for launching independent national human rights assessment; protection of the independence of the judiciary and the media; the inclusion of minorities in major institutions of society and the nation, such as the cabinet, the army and various elected and powerful bodies; reform to protect the police from political interference and increase in their public accountability; and promotion of human rights norms through the education system.

As Bangladesh approaches another general election and takes weary steps towards building democratic institutions and a democratic culture, the theme of human development through strengthening democracy has a particular resonance.

The writer is special adviser to UNICEF. The above are his personal comments.