

Cold War in Hot Seats

MINISTERS, their deputies and bureaucrats seem to be on warpath with one another thus hampering administration to the core, according to a frontpage report in this newspaper on Sunday. Three cabinet ministers were specifically mentioned for being in 'trouble' with their deputies. Their portfolios are quite important and the ministers are quite powerful as well. Yet these are ministries where the deputies feel sidelined by the cabinet ministers and hence a lot of dissatisfaction prevails in the ministries concerned causing a serious impediment to governmental work.

The main point of contention is the lack of job specification for the deputy or state ministers. When they are appointed they don't know their areas of operation and the ministers take full advantage of this loophole, keep all powers to themselves and wield their influence in all spheres. That leaves the deputies with a lot of spare time and the logistics of the government machinery to back them up in their mischief, if they would be up to it.

The phrase 'idle brain is devils' workshop' comes into full play much to the chagrin of the cabinet ministers. In the absence of specific responsibilities the deputies have time to team up with bureaucrats and put the spanner in the works of the ministers. Unless these deputies are given specific job description and responsibilities they are likely to continue with their wiles to vindicate their position.

To stop all this the PM must fix responsibilities for them as well as the ministries and define the equations between them.

We understand the veritable nuisance stemmed from a policy to satisfy smaller regional or district-wise proclivities. In order to avoid conflict in the party, the ghost is invited into the ministry itself. It is almost like 'from frying pan to fire'. At the time of appointment of deputies their expertise has to be taken into account and each one of them has to perform his or her designated task. Ministers appointed on political considerations must also have the capacity to run their departments without chaos and should not act as a tool of disharmony in the government.

Roll up the Sleeves

HEAVY monsoon rains have triggered floods in the upper catchment areas of the mighty Brahmaputra and already 2.5 million have been rendered homeless in Assam. Here in Bangladesh the three major rivers — the Padma, the Jamuna and the Meghna — have recorded rise in water levels during the past week at a number of places. The Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) has made a forecast about more new areas going under flood waters as four river basins have been put in a spate by heavy rains in different parts of the country. In specific terms, the FFWC has warned that vast areas from Bahadurabad in the north to Aricha in the south and Gualundo in the west to Bhagyakul in the east may be submerged due to continuous rise in water levels of the Jamuna and the Padma. Rivers Brahmaputra-Jamuna have swelled and the Meghna Southeastern Hill basins have also marked a sharp rise foreshadowing wider flooding in the country.

Once the flood waters from the upper catchment areas of Assam start cascading into Bangladesh the situation could really become worrisome. Some upazilas bordering India have already been affected. We better pay heed to the rumbling of flood and roll up our sleeves to minimise the damage that could be wrought by a bigger-than-usual flood. There are, of course, conflicting reports about the advent of floods in the country this year. But the symptoms are not very encouraging with the rainfall in the month of August having been exceeded forecast to the normal level by ten per cent. Let us be prepared for any eventuality. The relevant government ministries and agencies must remain alert and ready with all necessary logistic support to reach out to the affected areas on short notice. The authority must procure enough life-saving drugs and medicines for free distribution among the needy when the situation demands.

Crucially important at this stage is the joint monitoring of the flood situation with India for which the two countries had forged an understanding earlier on.

Home Minister's Directive

THE Home Minister's orders for demolishing illegal inter-district bus stands on different city roads have fallen on deaf ears. Apart from evicting one or two transport booths from Dhanmondi area, the traffic managers have, by and large, shown indifference to the minister's directive. The reason behind the traffic personnel's unwillingness seems obvious. The Dhaka traffic police allegedly receive an amount of Tk 31 lakh monthly as bribe from the owners of bus services, according to a report in the Bangla daily Prothom Alo. By defying ministerial instructions they have given three hoots to salvaging the city from tyrannical transport congestion.

Centring around the three hundred bus stands all over the city many illegal activities take place. These have turned out to be dens of criminals of various types — drug-related offenders, environment polluters, not to mention that a lot of public space is occupied by them creating inconvenience to city dwellers. We think the traffic department need to explain their temerity in disregarding the home minister's directive.

Whilst we would certainly like the home minister's instructions to be carried out we can quite see that dismantling of the illegal inter-district bus stands and their removal to proper places required a well-thought-out plan. We have to first find some spaces in less populated areas and designate them as the locations for bus stands before carrying out any surgical operation on unauthorised structures.

Mumbo-Jumbo Rules: Blind Faith is Murderous

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

Science cannot claim to know all there's to know. But scientific knowledge is objective, impersonal, potentially accessible to all, and above all, falsifiable. Science is not a closed system. Religious belief is. It lacks an experimental approach to knowledge. Superstition is downright unreasonable.

ARE is the month when we do not read stories of people driven by rank superstition to extraordinarily vile acts, including pledging unborn daughters as *devadasis*, injuring themselves through self-flagellation, even sacrificing children to propitiate deities.

In line with this come two recent reports from Nadia in West Bengal, where four-year-old Anju was married off to a dog, and the other from Gonda in Uttar Pradesh, where a 12-year-old was forced to marry 51-year-old Deynath Valpayee, a *kulin* Brahmin.

The two villages are wholly divergent. Haringhata in Nadia has cable TV. It has had *Operation Barga*-style land reform, and hosted science fairs; the illustrious physicist Satyendra Nath Bose was born in the neighbourhood, who attained fame through joint work with Einstein.

But Sirpurwa in Gonda scrapes the bottom of the underdevelopment barrel. Landlordism and landlessness rife there, as is grinding poverty. The RSS's Nanaji Deshmukh runs a rural development project here.

However, it is the commonality between the two villages that's overpowering. In Haringhata, Subal Karmakar followed the family priest's advice that dis-

ease-prone Anju would only be cured if married to a dog. (Earlier, four-year-old Tapas Murnu was sold there for 10 paise to fight the "evil eye".) Equally credulous was Nirmaladevi in Sirpurwa that her daughter's *nirvana* lies in marrying Valpayee.

Common to both are retrograde social customs, widespread deprivation (e.g. absence of elementary healthcare) and, above all, blind faith.

In the dark world of superstition, people don't act as agents of their destiny, who critically evaluate their options. They don't make decisions that they can take responsibility for.

Superstition is a substitute for thinking. It makes connection between cause and effect both invisible and unnecessary. You can attribute ill-health to spirits you don't see and to stars whose names you don't know.

Superstition often spurs violent action dictated by *karma*, fear of the unknown, and customs rooted in hierarchy. Thus, it seems "natural" to blame and attack "evil spirits" for human

acts. A widow can be branded a witch and parted from her land, even killed. Such phenomena have been prevalent from the United States in the 17th century, through 19th century Europe, to today's Asia.

However, three features of the phenomenon are special to India. First, superstition is intimately tied to social and gender inequality via religious faith. Fatalism is an important manifestation of this religion-superstition interface.

The bad "omen" or "evil eye" associated with, say, a childless woman or widow can only be rationalised by *ashta-putra* *soubhagya*, or the idea of womanhood being "blessed" with eight sons.

Similarly, ideas of ritual "purity" (of the twice-born) or "impurity" (of "low" castes) acquire power and currency because they are sanctioned in some way or other by the *shastras*, however interpreted. Thus the *Manu Smriti* insists on particularly barbaric punishment, e.g. pouring molten lead into the ears, solely for Dalits

and women. The killing of a Brahmin is described as *Brahmahatya*, the worst category of heinous crime.

Superstition invariably tends to discriminate against the underprivileged, and women and children. It is never neutral.

Secondly, Indian society is remarkably indulgent towards irrationalism. *Rahu kaalam*, snake-oil remedies, *vaastu*, and the "right" combination of stars are freely allowed to interfere with public life. Cabinet formation can be delayed to suit the appropriate *nurhurat*. *Yagnas* are performed to bring good omen.

The police hesitate to prevent barbaric practices like *sati* because they don't want to offend "time-honoured customs" or "community sentiments".

Under blind faith's reign, not many are shocked that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad opposes the Tehri damnot because it is located in a dangerously seismic zone, but because some *sadhus* say damming the Ganga will "kill" its capacity for spiritual self-purification!

Third, there is an inverse relationship between blind faith and what passes off for education in India. You can be a practising physicist and yet stop working during *rahu kaalam*. In personal life, our scientists tend to be even more superstitious than the illiterate public.

You can doctom successfully, but still be intensely superstitious.

It is a matter of shame that people in Pune, with its early history of social reform, have to agitate this day and age for equal rights to worship at the Kamaraj Dargah or Shanti-Shignapur temple. Women are barred from this "bachelor" god's temple.

Mumbo-jumbo rules as much in the "prosperous" pockets of Mumbai and Bangalore as backward Bihar. Indeed, retreat from reason is often rooted in fear of, and inability to cope with, the complexities and turmoil produced by modernisation and industrialisation.

To argue against superstition, against faith untempered by reason, is neither to undermine

religion nor to assert atheism. On the contrary, the real insult to religion comes from those who reduce faith to superstition.

Science cannot claim to know all there's to know. But scientific knowledge is objective, impersonal, potentially accessible to all, and above all, falsifiable. Science is not a closed system. Religious belief is. It lacks an experimental approach to knowledge. Superstition is downright unreasonable.

Today, our education system is set to sanctify superstition through degrees in *karmakand* (life-cycle rituals) and 'Vedic astrology'. University Grants Commission chairman Hari Gautam's logic is that the world over there is growing demand for *karmakand pandits* and 'Vedic astrology'.

This is preposterous. There is growing demand for violent entertainment and pornography too. Universities are not meant to cater to that, but promote rational understanding and exploration of physical and social reality.

It is one thing to be proud of ancient India's traditions in mathematics, logic or astronomy. It is another to lapse into superstition. If Dr Gautam, a medical doctor with no history as an educationist, has his way, canine-human weddings will soon replace real teaching. Nothing could be more pernicious.

Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory: The Myth and the Fact

by Rafiq A Siddique

The myth that BMTF had the capability of manufacturing everything from a pin to an airplane part is true and not true at the same time. It is true that with the help of such huge conglomeration of machines and other facilities of casting, forging, heat treatment, surface treatment-prototype of any spare/machine could be made there. But without pre-planned production lines with specific purpose machinery, it was not possible to cost-effectively mass-produce any item.

In the mid-seventies.

But for some reasons, the machinery imported under this arrangement differed from the original plan. Some plant and machinery were dropped or pruned which, unfortunately, told on the future production capability of the factory. Setting up of a foundry for making alloy steel and malleable cast iron as also addition of some modern machinery was supposed to come at a later phase which never happened. But it was only after this final phase that BMTF was supposed to produce machine tools. In the original plan, prior to this stage, BMTF was supposed only to assemble machine tools from imported CKD components and make some hand tools, cutting tools, agricultural equipment and spares for sugar and textile mills and other industries.

Another very significant fact was also, as usual, overlooked by the myth lovers. This abnormally long implementation period not only made it difficult to complete the factory as planned but the total business environment also had changed in the meantime. In fact, the rationale of setting up of this industry — "Import Substitution," itself was substituted by a

more modern concept coined by the developed economies for the developing economies, "Export or Perish".

The game plan of such new ideas will need a separate treatise. In this article, we will only examine the impact of this new idea on BMTF. BMTF, with its machinery of '70s or even late '60s could never compete with other countries who had the latest machinery and technology of '80s and '90s by which they could make the same product much faster and cheaper. Not to speak of exporting in Bangladesh market itself BMTF products could not compete with imported products for the same reason. The concept of protected market was also an obsolete idea by that time.

In addition to facts stated above, other premises on which the factory's feasibility was predicted did not also come true. As per the plan, after completion of the final phase of implementation, BMTF would start manufacturing Machine Tools with the support of sub contracting firms or vendors who would supply small parts. It was estimated that by that time country would have many such sub-contractors.

But this did not come about. In fact, land was also acquired near BMTF for allotting plots to such sub-contracting industries which remained unoccupied. As a result, BMTF had to produce all the parts in their own factory by using general purpose machines scattered all around the factory which made the production process time consuming and costly. This was one of the main built-in drawbacks of BMTF. It had many, in fact, more than needed, general-purpose machinery but had no specific production lines for any product.

The myth that BMTF had the capability of manufacturing everything from a pin to an airplane part is true and not true at the same time. It is true that with the help of such huge conglomeration of machines and other facilities of casting, forging, heat treatment, surface treatment-prototype of any spare/machine could be made there. But without pre-planned production lines with specific purpose machinery, it was not possible to cost-effectively mass-produce any item. And making of prototypes cannot make a factory commercially viable. BMTF management had proposed to the government near

the end of '80s to provide a fund for addition of a few attachments and machinery to have a few production lines and to modernise the plant. The foreign management consultants had also proposed this at the end of their 3-year term.

Finally, the yet other forecast in the market survey was that the country would have a proliferation of medium and small-scale engineering industries by the time factory's final phase was completed whose needs of plant and machinery would be met by this 'mother industry'. This phenomenon also did not occur as predicted for various reasons.

Synthesis: The antithesis of facts narrated above in a rather over-simplified manner for the benefit of general readers, however, need not make one totally pessimistic about the future of BMTF. Hindustan Machine Tools factory also took eight years before it reached break-even. And that, too, not by selling machine tools but by product diversification both going down to low-tech jobs like making grills for windows, up to watches. In BMTF, also the management took to some diversification efforts one of

which was assembling of buses/trucks in 1989-90 FY. A sample order against long term agreement with TATA Engineering Ltd. was also materialised. 12 minibus chassis were assembled and sold. Bangladesh Army, to whom the factory has been handed over recently, can make a fresh start as they have the technical manpower on their payroll who will possibly need some orientation which can be done easily. They also, supposedly, have the requisite fund for necessary BMR. They even have ready jobs like complementing many allied work of BOF (Bangladesh Ordnance Factory) and EME workshops as also R&D jobs for which BMTF's workshop will provide good opportunity.

Besides, assembling their own vehicles is something which they can start with immediately. Adding a paint shop and a few machinery like spot welding machines especially designed for vehicles assembly plants may be needed to make it a real assembly plant in future. But in the beginning, the CKD configuration in which the vehicles are imported now, can be assembled in BMTF right away. Finally, although the details of the Vendor's Agreement is not known, if the Army took it without previous liabilities, BMTF definitely will come nearer to the myth about it. And let us all hope for that happy synthesis between fact and myth.

The writer is a former Managing Director of BMTF.

To the Editor ...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Our rights;

Sir, Last year, in my area and many other areas there was a ban on broadcast of cable TV on the 15th of August. I wonder whether this year the same will repeat or not. National Mourning day, be it may, but dictates should not be made on how we spend our leisure time. The authority has no right to run our personal lives. Indeed National Mourning day should be observed with proper solemnity and decorum, but let's not go overboard.

Humayun I. Choudhury
Barani, Dhaka

Whither Municipal Commissioners?

Sir, What is the average level of efficiency of the municipalities in Bangladesh? The technical efficiency is poor (even after taking into cognisance of the limiting administrative environment); but the human systems loss is poorer, and the Mayor never mention it when he meet the press (take the dengue issue, for instance).

Municipal governance has never attracted the attention of the political governors, except at the time of elections. The attraction is for the post, not the motivation towards public service. Municipal regulatory mechanism are lax, and applied in an indifferent manner.

That brings in the next question: how good are the municipal ward commissioners at their stipulated and official duties and responsibilities? The local residents (of the mohalla) can testify on this judgement, provided a neutral survey is conducted, as the elected politicians are impervious to public feedback and criticism (the standard quip is conspiracy everywhere). The media reports make disturbing reading the way the journalists are being harassed by the municipal lords, for reporting lapses in

their areas (DS, Aug 2).

Who can pull up the elected Mayors? Perhaps not even the central committee of the relevant party, besides the LGRD Ministry. There is no system of publishing annually the condensed report of the working of each municipality/city corporation for public evaluation and comment. The Parliamentary SCs have become white elephants (DS, Aug 2), as their recommendations and strictures are blithely ignored (due to politicisation?).

The accountability has to be tightened up in the different tiers for transparency. What the elected reps are doing? The core question is to determine the current level of professionalism in municipal administration and management. There is too much politics undermining the matter. The whole structure of working has to be reviewed; and standard BMRE programmes need to be introduced, to cope with the accelerated urbanisation drive.

A taxpayer
Dhaka

Banks galore, names amiss

Sir, It seems that there is no limit to the number of new banks but the problem is we are running short of names. In other words, it can be said that in the mad rush no one is taking care with the names and therefore, one may confuse one bank with another (there is even a bank called "One Bank"). We should be able to specify a particular bank by its name. But, what do we have? There is "Standard Bank" (local) and there is "Standard Chartered Bank" (foreign). We have one called "Prime Bank" and another "Premier Bank" (to add to the confusion the priority banking division of Grindlays goes by the name "Premium Banking"). Again we have "The City Bank" (local) and "Citibank" (foreign). And would anyone believe that there

are two local banks— one by the name "Mutual Trust Bank" and another one called "The Trust Bank"? The list can go on and on. If this be case then how is somebody supposed to know which bank is being referred to?

A Distressed Observer
Chittagong

Satellite town planning

Sir, With the second Buriganga bridge now under construction across old Dhaka, the development plan of the satellite town and industrial area across the river has to be completed on priority basis, and the plan need to be widely publicised; otherwise chaos will prevail within a decade with unauthorised construction and other land-grabbing activities.

The price slots of the land may also be regulated. Dhaka city has to be decentralised fast with diversionary projects. The Greater Dhaka Plan is also not being publicised adequately for the investors (different from the Dhaka Master Plan).

AMA
Dhaka

"Expansion of BDR"

Sir, I would like to thank Kanita Ridwana of Dhaka University for her logical comments regarding the expansion of BDR (To The Editor, 24 July). It seems that in the name of strengthening BDR the army wants to acquire more power. The government should not concede their demand and should understand the fact that there are more important departments where more emphasis should be given.

We all are aware of the importance of a modern police force in a democratic country. But take a look at the state of our police force! They aren't well armed, well trained, and they are always used by the ruling party to achieve political goal. What we generally notice is that our police force are provided with poor transportation, equipment etc both in quality and quantity and consequently they are unable to render quality service.

In order to procure prompt and positive service from our police

force, the government must meet their needs. Otherwise we, the general people would be deprived of our rights, equity and justice and would never get optimum help from the law enforcing agency.

Md Moniruzzaman Khan
50, Dilkusha C/A,
Motijheel, Dhaka

Independence of Palestine

Sir, The Middle East peace talks in Camp David, USA has ended up in a fiasco because of lack of vision and statesmanship of Israeli PM Ehud Barak.

Why is Ehud Barak so flimsy to hand over East Jerusalem to the Palestinians?

Is not the collapse of Middle East peace talks a matter of grave concern for all of us?

If the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat declares independence on September 15, the target date set long ago for the independence of Palestine, would Israel retaliate and annex West Bank and Gaza land?

We wonder why USA, UK, France and UNO remained silent when Israel made unilateral declaration of independence on May 14, 1948?

Palestinian people have undergone untold sufferings and they have waited too long. Jerusalem is an inalienable part of Palestine, Arab-Muslim territory and it must be governed democratically by the Palestinians and not by Israel.

We hope that when the Palestinian leader declares independence USA, UK, France and UNO would react in a similar manner when Israel unilaterally declared its independence in 1948.

We would like to remind the world leaders that the problem of Palestine must be solved peacefully in accordance with the Article 49 of the fourth Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949, UN resolution 242 dated November 22, 1967 UN resolution 338 dated October 22, 1973 and Israeli PLO accord signed in White House, Washington on September 13, 1993.

An Observer
Dhaka

Reflection of a Dengue Victim

by Syed Muhammad Hussain

My doctor, suspecting that I might be suffering from a primary infection of dengue, had advised me to get the necessary blood tests done. A reputed pathological clinic delivered the report on 19 July and my consultant physician in another reputed clinic the same evening prescribed a number of drugs including an antibiotic course for seven days. My query regarding the test result for dengue virus showing 'IgM as negative (0.7999 AI) and IgG as Positive (2.477 AI (Antibody Index)', was waived away. Professor of Medicine told me not to worry, it is nothing and the medicines he had given should get me through. Any problem, I was advised, I could see him again! He got busy with the next patient! I came away, I must admit, with a feeling of pessimism about the current level of morality and ethics in this profession.

If I could not be given a reasonable response by the doctor, what chances do the other patients consulting him have for obtaining the right and genuine attention and treatment. But then we would like to sweep such dirt under the rugs and go about our lives praising the God in His Heavens and feigning all's well down here. I must hasten to add that there are honourable exceptions and they go out of their way to help those who come to them in agony, in blood and in tears. Hippocratic oath taken by all, seems to be honoured by so few!

My nephew, a young and bright doctor was not too happy with the opinion of the professor and the blood report on dengue virus and strongly urged me to go for a repeat test and a second opinion. During this period of inactivity, my two sons abroad got worried, as they did not find any more of my pieces on *The Daily Star* Internet edition. On learning from their mother about the possibility of my dengue infection, their deep anxiety was reflected in their insistence on making emergency arrangements for shifting me abroad. This, however, did not become necessary, as ten days had since passed with my condition improving considerably to everyone's great relief.

Even then, I consulted an expert in ICCDRB, where a den-

gue spot test and platelet count were done. Thank God, the test was negative and the count was an impressive 4 lakh 38 thousand. However, the expert on dengue at ICCDRB was certain that I had suffered from primary infection about 3 months ago. I do recall to have some fever, sweating and a feeling of fatigue about that time. It was taken to be a bout of flu and a course of antibiotics pulled me through. It is a pity that the professor did not know or realise (if he knew he certainly was reluctant to enlighten me on that account) that the present bout of fever and fatigue etc., was clear manifestation of a secondary infection (a relapse of the same dengue fever) and could become a matter of serious concern.

The inescapable fact of the matter here is that April onwards we were all exposed to the dengue virus. It is only when the media started reporting on the cases and on the increasing scale of its spread, without the authorities concerned doing anything about it, that attention got focused, quite unwillingly it seems on the possibility of the onset of a large scale epidemic. Health authorities and the municipal administration were activated only after the country suffered a significant toll of unsuspecting human lives. Instead of thanking the media and using their facilities of coverage to warn and advise the people about this preventable, but potentially fatal, disease, all over the country and using the media power to persuade them to undertake appropriate measures individually and in the community, the authorities preferred to decry the media and acted like the proverbial ostrich burying their heads in denials, disinformation and dire neglect in their avowed duties. An easy-to-prevent disease — just because there is a tendency to ignore the clear signs to take any threat to public very lightly and to escape without being accountable — is turned into such disasters to strike at the innocent people, for whom the authorities have been elected, appointed and paid for, to serve!

The writer is a retired Secretary to Bangladesh Government and a former Ambassador to Morocco, Nepal and Zimbabwe.