

Power Sector: Still Drawing Blank

THE inefficiency in our power sector reads like an open book. It has also become proverbial through repeated recitals. But like most hugely unresolved problems the dismal performance of our power sector produces only verbiage. One could even call it verbal diarrhoea, out of sheer disgust for lack of any redressal.

This has reference to a lively, somewhat contentious debate that raged day before yesterday at the workshop on the state of the power sector, the pace of reforms and power generation in future organised by the government and the World Bank.

Weaving through a myriad diagnostic interpretations of where the chief ailment of the power sector lies one can arrive at a pretty simple curative formula. With our existing production capacity of 2500 MW we could meet the present demand for electricity if only we had brought down theft and systems loss to a level comparable with that of the advanced countries.

With the WB resident representative Federick Temple pointing out that only 55 per cent of the electricity generated is paid for, the government has its job cut out. Labour reform holds an answer but hardly the full answer to the problem, because part of the political parties' funding comes from the contributions of CBAs.

What is of paramount importance is to ask the government this simple question: with all your knowledge of facts and figures about electricity what have you been doing for the last four years to show even an iota of improvement in this vital sector?

Environment Court Enigma

WE find the finance ministry's reluctance to release funds for installation of environment courts at the five divisional headquarters rather extraordinary. There cannot be any legal tangle since the Jatiya Sangsad has passed the relevant legislation. Politically, too, the proposition appears enconced on convergence of opinion.

So, essentially it is a very unexpected bureaucratic snag that environment court has hit at this stage. In all likelihood, the ministry has resorted to the cliché laden pretext of 'fund constraints' to keep the proposition in abeyance. We are sure the finance minister and his men are aware of the concept called 'priority management'.

At the administrative level, the government hasn't shown much activism, either. To be precise, it hasn't even tried to get its own house into order. Has there been any effort to reduce emission from the vehicles on its transport pool? The motorised vehicles at the government's disposal do make a pitiable sight with most of them spewing black smokes.

YAMADA Masahiro, a sociologist who teaches at Tokyo Gakugei University, recently wrote on the socio-economics of the singles (bachelors) in Japan. The phenomenon of surging singles is termed by Masahiro as Parasaito Shingura or parasite singles. According to the sociologist, as many as 60 per cent of single men and 80 per cent of single women aged between 20 and 34 live with their parents.

The Spoiled Singles

"As a group, the 10 million 'parasite' singles are dragging down the economy jeopardising the future of the Japanese society by contributing to the decline in the number of children and depleting the supply of energy for social reforms."

nese economy and also cast a shadow on the health of the society in future. In a paper titled The Growing Crop of Spoiled Singles, published in Japan Echo (June 2000, Vol. 27, No. 3), the author sets forth a number of episodes about the singles in Japan.

Masahiro noted that "many live with their parents without getting married. In 1970, about 70 per cent of men and 45 per cent of women between the ages of 20 and 29 were single. In 1995 these ratios had risen to 85 per cent of

men and 65 per cent of women. The proportion who continue living with their parents is also on the rise." The economics of living with parents is that (a) singles can avoid payment of rent and contribute just 10,000 to 30,000 yen a month for food; (b) they also can leave the housework to their mothers. The "surplus" so gener-

ated by the singles are poured into the purchase of famous brand goods, a car and virtually anything else that suits their sweet will. If for any reason whatsoever, they fall to find jobs with attractive salaries or are forced to be sacked, the singles still enjoy a better life since the basic needs are met by the parents.

What are the impacts on the economy? The 10 million 'parasite' singles tend to generate demand for luxury goods. Sales and using the goods in their parents' home is climbing and the number of young people living on their own or marrying is falling steadily, resulting in the loss of a demand that under normal circumstances should have been expanding.

Besides, the demographic changes also need a mention. The fall in birth rate is added to the rise in singles. In Japan today, married couples have on average 2.2 children - a figure that has not basically changed in 20 years.

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



have reportedly, been rising at Louis Vuitton Japan and other such companies despite a downturn. So is on surge the demand for PCs, mobile phones and other items attractive to the singles.

The disconcerting news is, however, the dampening effect on effective demand; more specifically, the demand for housing and consumer durable which rises when young adults get their own place or get married or start a home.

The 'Right Side of History'? Vajpayee Buries Nehru's Ghost

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

INDIA and America stand on the right side of history," declared Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee at the September 17 glittering White House dinner. President Bill Clinton was no less effusive: "Together India and America can change the world."

The new Indo-US "natural" alliance or "partnership" has been hailed as the fruition of a major Indian foreign policy shift begun with the 1998 nuclear tests. The key, we are told, is Mr Vajpayee's "junking" of India's "archaic Nehruvian baggage" while deftly using economic diplomacy and the "clout of the diaspora".

Mr Clinton has been in a pro-India overdrive. After his memorable visit to "exotic" India, he has been exposed richly to America's "indigenous" India too-Silicon Valley and Indian food. To top it all, 85 of the 700 guests at his dinner had contributed to Ms Hillary Clinton's election funds.

However, do India and America really agree on "the kind of world" they want? The honest answer

must be ambiguous. True, New Delhi scored some gains in the US at Pakistan's expense. It got Washington to soften its stance on the nuclear issue and Kashmir. And India's moratorium on nuclear tests "until the CTBT comes into effect" remains subject to "its supreme national interests".

So India conceded little, and gained something. However, differences and sources of friction remain, apart from fundamental disproportions in interests, ambition, power and reach. The US is a hegemonic leader of the First World. India will long remain a Third World country-even with nine per cent GDP growth.

America wants a West-dominated neo-liberal "free-market" global order where capital has total freedom and no accountability. India's interests in reshaping this unequal order. The US seeks to bully the UN and turn conflict-zones into its own protectorates. India's best bet is an orderly world with

greater North-South balance. America's Asian priorities include securing access to oil and minerals, keeping sea-lanes open, and penetrating large markets (e.g. China). India's ambitions are more inward-looking and modest. America can play around with many regional powers in many ways: e.g. trade with China, build strategic alliances with India or Taiwan, and contain Japan. India has few such options.

There is a pro-India "ult" in Washington too. In the 1980s, Pakistan became a US "frontline

state. The ground-reality changed with the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan. US policy has now caught up. This change is reinforced by Pakistan's new crisis as a "falling" state. China-baiters have further raised India's weight as a counterfoil to China, America's strongest Asian rival.

Further, the Vajpayee government has opened up India to predatory globalisation, favouring US agribusiness, energy and financial interests. Just before the Clinton visit, it unilaterally lifted 1,400 import restrictions.

However, note the praise showered on Mr Vajpayee by Vice-President Gore: "As a poet, you have inspired the imagination of your people... to... create a shared vision for a united, prosperous and peaceful India..."

To the Editor ...

"Are Biman DC 10s old and vintage?"

Sir, I had the opportunity to read a letter written by one Mr Mazhar Haq (DS, 22 Sept) and another by one Mr Mohammad R. Rahman (DS 28 Sept) on the subject whether Biman DC 10s have become old and vintage.

I got my education under US Airforce College of Aeronautical Engineering and obtained B.Sc Eng Degree. I have worked in many international airlines in the field and management. I have reasonable knowledge in performance and reliability of an aircraft.

As the aircraft gets old, its performance and reliability goes down. A commercial aircraft is taken as safe up to 50,000 (fifty thousand) flight hours. No commercial airline operates passenger aircraft older than fifty thousand flight hours. Bangladesh airlines has DC/OS having each about 70,000 (seventy thousand) flight hours. Therefore, whatever may be the quality of maintenance, Biman should not fly DC/OS anymore.

Moreover a Boeing 777 operated by Biman during hajj burnt only 38 tons fuel between Dhaka-Jeddah with 400 passengers whereas a DC/OS burns 60 ton fuel with only 250 passengers in the same route. DC/OS engines are very old model and has high fuel consumption than present B 777/A340 aircraft. An airlines 80 per cent money is spend on fuel cost. So Biman has to replace the DC 10 aircraft.

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Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant

Sir, We are shocked to learn that the government is planning to set up a nuclear power plant. It is really unthinkable that the government could even consider setting up such a plant as everyone knows what disastrous effects it may have on the environment. Moreover, if any acci-

dent occurs hell will break loose.

The Chernobyl disaster is still vivid in people's mind. Fourteen years after the worst civilian nuclear disaster Chernobyl is still considered a nightmare. The accident caused by human error took the toll on countless innocent lives and created increase in childhood cancers, congenital malformations, spontaneous abortions and various stress-related and immune system illnesses in a wide area surrounding the disaster zone.

The safe disposal of the nuclear plants' radioactive waste is also a serious problem because there is no place where it could be disposed off safely.

It is learnt that many countries considering the threats, have taken steps. In the United States all the plants ordered since the mid-70s have been cancelled. In Britain, France and Germany nuclear building programmes have been stopped. Sweden has decided to close all nuclear power stations by 2010 which account for almost half the country's electricity generation and in Italy a 1987 referendum made the government to shut down all its nuclear stations.

When the situation is like this all over the world, developed countries are closing down their plants, we, Bangladeshis are planning to set up a nuclear power station-- the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant.

We, therefore demand that the plan of setting up this nuclear power station must be abandoned because it may hold disastrous impact for the present and future generations. We hope the government will be wise enough to consider the warnings.

Nur Jahan Chittagong

The noise makers

Sir, Most politicians are a pain in the neck when they talk glibly. At different talk shows they reveal more ignorance than knowledge, and waste the time of the listeners (more so at the public meetings). They stray away from the issue or topic under discussion or questioning, side track the criticism, and dwell on their achievements.

Very few personalities can face the bitter truth openly in public.

The Dhaka Mayor seems to support the law breakers when he defended overcrowding of vehicles on the roads and the unlicensed drivers and vehicles, on the ground of serving the damned public. Such leaders are totally unfit for public offices, when they find excuses for their incompetence, and then take a morally unacceptable stand.

Management and operation is quite different from political oratory. Doing things, and explaining situations are not the same or interchangeable. Why our leaders cannot issue unpopular and tough policy and administrative orders?

AZ Dhaka

Concern for the environment

Sir, It is high time we do something about the increasing pollution in Bangladesh, especially Dhaka city. Everywhere we turn to, we see pollution of various category--noise pollution, air pollution, littering, etc.

One of the common problems that we come across is the excess use of polythene bags. People everywhere use polythene without giving a second thought to it. Studies have shown that polythene is very harmful to health as well as to the environment. It does not dissolve in the ground and thus clogs up the drainage system. During the recent spell of incessant rain, the roads were flooded, as the water could not drain away because of the polythene bags blocking the drains. It is high time the concerned authority come forward and do something about it like restricting the use of polythene bags and introducing alternatives like paper bags, jute bags etc. It is our duty to ensure the next generation a safe and sound environment.

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Opinion

We Need a Safe City

Nayeema Chowdhury

Every year "Habitat Day" is observed with a new slogan. All those slogans, however, bear meaningful rationale. In the year 1990, the slogan was "Shelter and Urbanization," in the year 1991, it was "Shelter and Living Environment," in the year 1992, it was "Shelter and Sustainable Development," and in the year 1993, it was "Women and Shelter Development."

The remarkable point is that all those slogans are ornamented with the word "shelter." They in 1997, the theme of habitat day delivered by the Secretary General put importance on how to make cities fit places to live in. In other words it emphasizes on sustainable human settlement and dedicates to the eradication of poverty with a view to making cities fit places for all. Not only that, in the year 1998, the slogan for habitat day was "Safer Cities," and in the year 1999, it was "Cities for All. The focal point of Secretary General's message and the slogans of recent past years are city centric. Moreover we can highlight the ten good policies, announced by UNCHS to make cities better places for all:

- \* Welcome the opportunities provided by the growth of the cities, but combat inequality and environmental degradation. Otherwise the cost of cities will outweigh their benefits.
\* Release the energies and tap the resources of people and business, but don't leave everything to markets. Government must co-ordinate the actions of others, monitor and correct abuses. Freedom to build must be balanced by a duty to protect the interest of others.
\* The best way to protect the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged people where government resources are scarce is to attack supply constraints especially in the supply of land and finance on a very large scale. Use positive measures, such as guided investments, rather than negative ones.
\* Strengthen the economic,

political and civic institutions of the city. Establish open, transparent and accountable government. Create an enabling framework for civic action and respect non-governmental and community-based organisations as independent expressions of civic society. Always involve women.

\* Maximize the use of public-private partnership to draw in additional resources and capacities, but don't confuse "private" with "commercial." All partners must receive benefits from their participation. The public sector holds fiduciary interest in future for all citizens.

\* Concentrate on scaling-up successful ideas, attitudes and approaches, not just projects and programmes. Use scarce public funds to lever additional resources from larger structures and institutions on a sustained basis. Strengthen links between formal and informal structures.

\* Increase local control over resources with accountable structures and transparent performance monitoring. Public policy can make a difference, even when resources are scarce. Strengthen government capacity, but don't see urban management as panacea.

\* Don't take on too much: focus on a few key cross-sectional issues such as urban poverty, the "Brown Agenda" and supply constraints. Lay down time-bound goals and strategies to address them. Maximize the flow of information and learning.

\* Don't divorce shelter and human settlements from wider economic, political and social policies. Adopt a holistic approach.

\* Make policies according to the local institution, not imported models or ideologies. Global market economies is not all answers to problem of equitable or sustainable human settlements development. Every year, habitat day becomes a day of festive gather-

ing of planners, engineers and architects. To celebrate the day we work together with eager attitude. We attend different seminars, symposia and visit demonstrative stalls organised by say, Public Works Department. Usually we enjoy the day but few questions always remain unanswered.

After observing the day, normally I start to ask in my mind what is the outcome? Have we achieved something? Yes, we have achieved some new thoughts and techniques, which may open our horizon of knowledge. In reality these achievements illuminate the knowledge of technocrats, not the target group for whom we observe the day. How much have we been urbanised by providing shelter? Are we being provided with a living environment with proper shelter? What is the range of participation of women in shelter development? How many cities are safe for everybody? Are the cities planned for everybody or for selective groups? And, do we have the opportunities to follow the ten good policies to make the cities fit places for all?

This year's slogan is Women in Urban Governance. I do not have any capability to evaluate all those remarkable slogans and policies. But in my small horizon of knowledge, I think that something should be done beyond the conventional celebration of habitat day. We have to create such situation that city dwellers do not think there is nobody to take care of them. It is long over due to think and do something for them. Since we have to be urbanised, create living environment and sustainable development through shelter development, we have to be authentic and dynamic in approach.

Let us make our cities liveable sincerely following the declared policies, structurally and environmentally. Let us effectively empower the women to govern and make cities safe for them.