The Baily Star Founder-Editor : Late S.M. Ali

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Power Sector: Still Drawing Blank

THE inefficiency in our power sector reads like an I 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. The big thing missing has obviously been the political will to stand up to vested interests on the one hand and the failure to garner funds for enhanced energy generation capacities on the other.

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. The USAID, New Zealand Trade Development Corporation, World Bank Institute and Energy Sector Management Programme were among the sponsors while thoughtfully representatives from the Consumer Association of Bangladesh and Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) of Power Development Board were invited to the workshop.

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. This is a convincing way of highlighting the sense of loss suffered through corruption being indulged in by the power sector CBA and the lack of management efficiency to stem systems losses other than pilferage.

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. The give-and-take bonding remains the hydra-headed monster casting a shadow over the reform programme. That obviously puts a heavy premium on political will and consensus, which will have to be forged by the political parties, not merely as a covenant of understanding but as a statutory obligation incorporated in the Constitution. Inefficiency and corruption are basically the handmaiden of state monopoly in the sphere of generation, transmission and distribution of electricity. Privatisation will breed competition, in pricing and services to the benefit of the consumers but even there we would need to stand guard over monopoly cartel.

With only 20 per cent of our people having any access to electricity we certainly need to raise the power generation capacity as a poverty alleviation strategy.

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

/ E find the finance ministry's reluctance to VV 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 ensconced on convergence of opinion. Both the ruling and opposition parties have made public their commitment to environmental conservation. Besides, the issue as such is evocative of tremendous public support. In fact, the very idea of environment court has come about in the face of sustained popular pressure for administrative and legislative activism to protect the environment. The media certainly deserves creditalong with members of the civil society and non-government organisation (NGO) activistsfor creating awareness amongst people and successfully uniting them against environmental degradation.

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'. In the midst of ever-escalating incidence of environment degradation such as depletion of greenery, dereliction of natural water bodies, air pollution, encroachment of open spaces, etc should environment court not be considered a priority? Is allusion to fund constraints in this case no less eco-hostile than the act of eco-destruction itself?

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. In case of encroachment, too, relevant state apparatus has not taken any pre-emptive action as to fend off illegal occupation. On the contrary, indifference and indulgence at times on the part of state agencies have encouraged, if not expedited, environment degradation. The government must get its act together on the environmental front; otherwise people will weigh them on the same scale as they do the ecounfriendly lot.

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 socior parasite singles. According to ety 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. First, in 1970 people in their 20s lived with the lowest satisfaction. This contrasts with 1997 when "satisfaction peaked among twenty-yearolds, fell to a low among forty year-olds and rose again among older age groups though not to the peak level. In addition, the proportion of people who identified their own living standard as "high" or "upper middle" was the largest among the twenty-yearolds." While in most part of the world (be it Europe or USA) youth remains a symbol of "poverty," Japan finds them in affluence. What is the reason?

Masahiro noted that "many live with their parents without getting married. In 1970, about 70 per tends to reckon that 10 million cent of men and 45 per cent of 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-

breed of singles is beginning to and using the goods in their parwreak havoc on Japanese society. It may also be undermining the economy and eroding such traits as individual vitality and motiva-

What are the impacts on the economy? The 10 million "parasite" singles tend to generate demand for luxury goods. Sales

by Abdul Bayes

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 fail 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. Masahiro sees something wrong with a society where extravaganza grips parasite singles - with their women between the ages of 20 singles living free of responsibility while the middle-aged suffer the most hardship. 'The surge in this

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. "Presently, the number of singles living with their parents

ents' 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. A slightly higher demand for luxury goods does not compensate for this loss." On the other hand, it is estimated that if just one-tenth of the ten million young singles living with their parents moved into their own place, demand for one room apartment would rise by one million units. Again, if one-tenth of those got married or moved out and started living with their boyfriend or girlfriend, this would generate a demand for additional 500,000 three-room units. So, parasite singles leave a strong

Besides, the demographic changes also need a mention. The fall in birth rate is adduced 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 Putting off marriage and not getting married by young people

impact on the economy.

contribute to a decline in Japanese birth rate. "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."

Thus, the sociologist suggested a three-fold solution.

First, to support the young people in getting married. Tax breaks can be given to these who live on their own. Housing can be made available on preferential basis to couples that are independent of parents. In other words, young people should be assured of a lifestyle suitable to them even without the "hidden subsidy" from parents.

Second, Japanese parents should alter their attitudes towards children. What they want now is the happiness of their children even at their sorrows. The anxiety of parents tends to push their children to live with them.

Third, households in which unmarried adult children live together with their parents should be taxed. On an incentive scheme, where 'living on their own' children's household should be introduced. Unless steps are taken to make young people selfreliant, Japan could face acute crisis in the years to come.

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

Praful Bidwai writes from New Delhi

India isn't wise to have moved so close to a two-faced hegemonic power. The U.S., on the one hand, is a

democracy. On the other, its international role is largely negative: it leads an unjust global order and has

supported a range of dictatorships. Ultimately, India's claim to global respect will be settled not by alli-

ances with great powers, but by its social development indices and independent foreign policy.

NDIA and America stand on the right side of history," Adeclared 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."

AMADA Masahiro, a soci-

ologist who teaches at

Tokyo Gakugei University,

recently wrote on the socio-

economics of the singles (bache-

lors) in Japan. The phenomenon

of surging singles is termed by

Masahiro as Parasaito Shingura

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 1995 national census reveals

that five million men and five

million women or a total of 10

million belong to this segment of

the singles. The trend of living

with parents is not new but the

proportion is steadily rising.

"Given the steady rise in the

proportion of people not marry-

ing, parasite singles will likely to

account for 10 per cent of the

Japanese population in 2000,"

observed Masahiro. Then he

urged. 'These are young men and

women who continue living with

their parents even after they

become adults enjoying are

carefree and well-to-do life as

singles." To be or not to be a single

is the choice of the individual

concerned. But what seems to

bother the famous sociologist is

their "attitude" and "lifestyle." He

attitude and lifestyle - could

leave severe impact on the Japa-

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"

Undoubtedly, no Indian was as grandly welcomed in Washington the way Mr Vajpayee was. And never before could a US President say: "It's inconceivable ...that we can build the kind of world we want... unless there is a very strong partnership between the US and India.

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 UN and turn conflict-zones into 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

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 percent GDP growth.

America wants a Westdominated neo-liberal "freemarket" global order where capital has total freedom and no accountability. India's interests lie in reshaping this unequal order. The US seeks to bully the 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

India and America are in different leagues, on different sides of history. So why the new bonhomie? Three things have changed. First, New Delhi has abandoned its non-aligned, autonomous, foreign policy. Its new strategic "partnership" with Washington is unequal and asymmetrical. It was driven by a rightward shift in society, culture and economy in the nineties, and the consolidation of a consumerist elite alienated from the people.

There is a pro-India "tilt" in really agree on "the kind of world" its own protectorates. India's best Washington too. In the 1980s, bet is an orderly world with 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 "failing" state. Chinabaiters 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.

And just before leaving for the US, Mr Vajpayee announced the opening up of international telephony-two years ahead of schedule. US multinationals are sali-

The second change is Washington's showering of respectability upon the BJP, a communal rightwing party not very different from Georg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, which attracted stiff sanctions from the European This community commands

Opinion

ered on Mr Vajpayee by Vice-President Gore: "As a poet, you have inspired the imagination of your people... to... create shared vision for a united, prosperous and peaceful India..." One may have differences over Mr Vajpayee's poetry. But no Indian could claim that it has "inspired"

the people's "imagination". Mr Clinton praised Mr Vajpayee for cherishing India's "marvellous diversity". He should have known better. Mr Vajpayee's Hindu-primacy politics militates against diversity.

Mr Clinton was full of admiration for Gandhi and India's independence struggle. Little did he know that Hindutva was not part of that struggle. Indeed it provided the ideological inspiration to Gandhi's assassination.

But Washington has effectively given Hindutva a clean chit.

The third major change is the ascendancy of American NRIs, the US's richest ethnic minority. However, note the praise show- The Clintons were dazzled by "Nehruvian baggage."

them. On September 23, a mere 26 NRIs collected close to a million dollars for them-in one after-

The top layers of NRIs now compete with other Americans in opulent lifestyles. Total Indian-American buying power is of the order of \$20 billion. The 1.5 million-strong community is likely to triple in size over a decade with liberalised H-1B visas. It would then exercise a strong rightward pull. This is bound to make itself felt in India too.

All these conservative trends offer no solace to secular liberals. Seemingly "friendlier" Indo-US relations could create even further imbalances and limit India's options. This is already happening in Iraq over sanctions.

India isn't wise to have moved so close to a two-faced hegemonic power. The US, on the one hand. is a democracy. On the other, it international role is largely negative: it leads an unjust global order and has supported a range of dictatorships.

Ultimately, India's claim to global respect will be settled not by alliances with great powers, but by its social development indices and independent foreign policy. That's where Mr Vajpayee may have inflicted grave damageby discarding independmoney and, increasingly, votes. ence, in the name of jettisoning

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 air-

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 any more.

Moreover a Boeing 777 operated by Biman during hajj burnt only 38 tons fuel between Dhaka-Jeddah with 400 passengers countries are closing down their whereas a DC/OS burns 60 ton plants, we, Bangladeshis are 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 stressrelated 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 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. Dhanmondi, Dhaka

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 incompetency, 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?

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 environ-

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We Need a Safe City

Nayeema Chowdhury

observed with a new slogan. All of the city. Establish open, architects. To celebrate the day those slogans, however, bear transparent and accountable we work together with eager meaningful rationale. In the government. Create an attitude. We attend different year 1990, the slogan was enabling framework for civic seminars, symposia and visit "Shelter and Urbanization," in action and respect nonthe year 1991, it was "Shelter governmental and community- by say, Public Works Departand Living Environment," in the based organisations as indeyear 1992, it was "Shelter and pendent expressions of civic but few questions always society. Always involve women. 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 from their participation. The which may open our horizon of General put importance on how public sector holds fiduciary to make cities fit places to live interest in future for all citiin. In other words it emphasizes zens. on sustainable human settlement and dedicates to the successful ideas, attitudes and eradication of poverty with a approaches, not just projects view to making cities fit places and programmes. Use scarce for all. Not only that, in the year public funds to lever additional 1998, the slogan for habitat day resources from larger struc- ment with proper shelter? was "Safer Cities," and in the tures and institutions on a year 1999, it was "Cities for All. sustained basis. Strengthen The focal point of Secretary links between formal and infor- opment? How many cities are General's message and the mal structures. slogans of recent past years are city centric. Moreover we can resources with accountable for selective groups? And, do we

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 nega-

tive ones. * Strengthen the economic, becomes a day of festive gather-

Every year "Habitat Day" is political and civic institutions ing of planners, engineers and

* Maximize the use of publicadditional resources and

highlight the ten good policies, structures and transparent lic policy can make a difference, the cities fit places for all? even when resources are scarce. Strengthen government capacity, but don't see urban management as panacea.

focus on a few key crosssectional 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.

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 equisettlements development.

Every year, habitat day

demonstrative stalls organised ment. Usually we enjoy the day remain unanswered.

After observing the day, private partnership to draw in normally I start to ask in my mind what is the outcome? capacities, but don't confuse Have we achieved something? "private" with "commercial." All Yes, we have achieved some partners must receive benefits new thoughts and techniques. knowledge. In reality these achievements illuminate the knowledge of technocrats, not * Concentrate on scaling-up 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 environ-What is the range of participation of women in shelter develsafe for everybody? Are the * Increase local control over cities planned for everybody or have the opportunities to follow announced by UNCHS to make performance monitoring. Pub- the ten good policies to make

This year's slogan is Women in Urban Governance. I do not have any capability to evaluate all those remarkable slogans * Don't take on too much: 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 * Don't divorce shelter 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 table or sustainable human and environmentally. Let us effectively empower the women to govern and make cities safe for them.