

ICT policy

Realistic targets, prompt implementation needed

THE draft national information communication technology (ICT) policy, according to Science and Technology Minister Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan, aims at building an information technology-driven nation by 2010. Its primary objective is to promote and facilitate use of IT in all spheres of the economy. A countrywide IT infrastructure will be developed, which, in its turn, will facilitate access to information, lead to development of human resources and eventually ensure transparency, good governance, better management and sustainable development, the minister hopes.

We would like to point out that ever since IT was marked out as a thrust sector, governments have hopped from one approach to the other in the name of getting the country a jumpstart on the information superhighway. Commissions were formed and task forces assigned to devise ways and means to tap the rich resources IT has on offer. However, no sooner had these recommendations been set forth, the attention riveted on to so-called politically correct ventures. In the end, sets of recommendations gathered dust and our IT dreams remained unfulfilled as other countries, which started out on the information superhighway only recently, have zoomed past us.

As for Dr Khan's draft policy we would like to say, right now, the country's primary concern should be to overcome the lack of proper telecom infrastructure so as to help bolster our information technology drive. Another major worry is we do not have enough IT-convertant manpower. These are the issues we should be investing more time and energy in. A prudent policy is not about how many areas it deals with; rather, it is about how many issues it can effectively address. The proposed ICT policy can only give the government more bites than it can chew if sufficient funds are not placed for its implementation. Let the policy be simple and its objectives well defined. Professor Muhammad Yunus has been saying the number of poor people in the country can be halved in ten years if we can effectively tap IT resources. Our policy imprudence has so far held us back from making that happen. Let it be overcome now.

Lady doctor trapped and violated

Ferret out the sex maniac and punish him severely

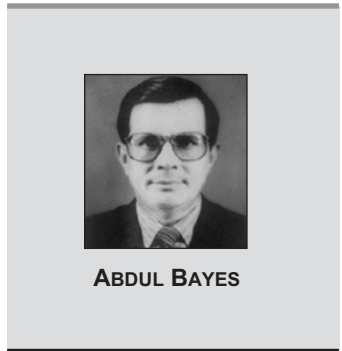
SHE planned to move her clinic to a new location. As a professional physician treating patients she was obviously no stranger to public dealings. Against that backdrop, she was looking around for a suitable flat to house her clinic. Just in case the news was missed by some, here is the gist of the story: she bumped into a five-storied apartment building and apparently evinced a preliminary interest in renting a particular flat. Leaving it at that on the day, she told the house-owner she would let him know of her final decision later on. According to reports, Rabiul Islam, owner of the apartments called her up a few days later to take a fresh look at the empty flat to be put on hire. At one stage, when the lady was inspecting the flat, Rabiul had his caretaker Harun leave the place to fetch some cold drinks for the 'guest'. He then comes out in true colours and violates her at gun-point.

She has filed a police case and so we come to know of it. There could well have been others who had been trapped, their utter helplessness exploited by sexual pervers, and yet their cases never came to see the light of the day. The society must praise the lady doctor for the courage and a far-reaching sense of social responsibility with which she came forward to report the matter to the police.

A plethora of questions stares us in the face: a woman's right to free movement, her livelihood and, above all, to the dignity of her person has been blatantly violated. With the woman's exposure and activity levels increased by the day one would have expected a maturer behaviour from any member of the male sex unless he is a total pariah. The reason for heightened sexual perversity and roguery that we see today is largely rooted in the rapists' sense of impunity that they would somehow go scot-free like others of their ilk in the past.

The outraged lady doctor's case has been taken under the Woman and Child Repression Act. If the punishment prescribed by it is meted out to the offender after his prosecution and trial it could have a deterring effect on others nurturing any evil design towards women.

Rural economy: A look back into the 1990s



ABDUL BAYES

THE International Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE) organized its regional symposium at Dhaka on October 2-3 in collaboration with Bangladesh Association of Agricultural Economists (BAAE). The IAAE draws members from all over the world with particular interest in agriculture and rural development researchers. The meetings are usually held after every two years to hear from Nobel laureates, professors and researchers about the past, present and the future of the agricultural economies -- the providers of food and employment for the teeming millions around the globe. The writer had in the past the privilege of presenting papers and participating in discussions on issues pertaining to agriculture and rural development in several IAAE conferences. As Gorge Peters of Oxford once put it, the IAAE meeting is "by common consent an outstanding event; academically stimulating, professionally rewarding, institutionally fascinating and socially enjoyable". The last meeting was in Berlin in 2000 and the next is in the offing in South Africa. Dr Joachim von Braun (the leading international agricultural economist from Germany and now the DG of IFPRI) is presiding over this prestigious organization as president and running the show with his running mate, Dr. Prabhu Pingali. It would, perhaps, not be an exaggeration to say that the deliberations from the IAAE continue to hold the key to the future progress of agriculture and rural development throughout the world.

Augmented agriculture
In the just completed regional conference, Dr Mahabub Hossain presented the keynote paper. He is an eminent economist of Bangladesh now working as Economist and Head of the Social Sciences Division of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). The paper was titled as "Poverty Alleviation through Agriculture and Rural Development in Bangladesh: Achievements, Constraints and Strategy". In his keynote address,

the author succinctly summarized what had seemed to happen to our rural economy over the years and their impacts on poverty alleviation. It appeared to me that the author discussed the performance of the past, problems of the present and potentials of the future. Again, by focussing on the experience of the 1990s, the author seemingly opened the options to compare the performances of our agricultural sector across regimes viz. autocratic vs. democratic and protectionist vs. liberalised regimes. In the

for Bangladesh", Aminur Rahman, Gregory Kisunko and Kapil Kapoor of the World Bank presented some facts and figures for policy makers to ponder over. "If Bangladesh were able to reduce corruption levels to those found in the more advanced East European countries (i.e. Poland or Hungary) holding other things constant, its corresponding annual average growth rate during 1990-97 could have been increased by between 1.65-2.14 percentage points. Achieving these rates of growth over the post independence

to pay for imported non-cereal products. Specially, the reduction in the availability of pulses -- an important source of protein and micronutrients -- has adversely affected the balanced nutrition of the poor.

Farm and non-farm employment
As noted earlier, the ripples created through forward and backward linkages, boosted non-farm activities in rural areas. Agricultural growth brought forth a number of chain effects through generating (a)

the target (millennium development goal) of reducing poverty by half by 2015. However, acceleration in economic growth coupled with a deceleration in poverty reduction points to a growing inequality in the distribution of income both in urban and rural areas.

But poverty has other dimensions too. Mention before was made of income poverty only. But there are indications that Bangladesh has made moderate progress in other dimensions. For example, primary school enrolment ratio reached 75

New villain of peace?

While nature-induced vulnerability and risks have been reduced to a great extent, the man-made insecurity and vulnerability in terms of violence, lawlessness and lack of justice seem to have substantially increased in rural areas. Dr. Hossain did not elaborate on this aspect. But suffice it to say perhaps that the worst ever law and order situation -- growing terrorism, extortion -- the interference by the government in the application of justice by the courts, the endemic violence -- all that Bangladesh witnessed over the last one year or so could turn the tide back. Bangladesh has learnt to win over the arch rival nature but needs to win over the newly emerging man-made crisis of violence, lawlessness and justice.

Challenge and choice

In this land-scarce society, poverty is mainly concentrated in households who do not have assets. Manual labour is the only resource of the poor households. They are mostly engaged in agricultural wage labour and transport operations while the non-poor are engaged in business, services and land based activities. The incidence of poverty is reported to be 80 per cent among households with no land, 60 per cent among those holding up to 0.2 ha and almost none among households owning more than 1 ha of land. About 40 per cent of the households without cultivated land fail to feed family members three meals a day while 26 per cent of those with 0.2 ha. tend to face this problem. When in Bangladesh one-third of households do not own any cultivated land and another 17 per cent are saddled with an uneconomical size of 0.2ha, how can agriculture improve the livelihood of this bottom 50 per cent? In 2000, a farm household operated on average 0.65 ha. At the going land productivity level, this size of farm could generate an income of only US\$100 per person per year which is only 70 per cent of the cost of basic needs (poverty line). On the other hand, a poor household with 0.29ha. can meet only 30 per cent of the basic needs. "In that sense a broad-based rural development rather than a narrowly focussed agricultural development is absolutely essential for poverty reduction for an extremely land scarce country such as Bangladesh". It is the expansion of the non-farm sector that has been contributing most to the incremental incomes of the poor and it is the non-farm sector that has to bear the burden in the foreseeable future.

Abdul Bayes is professor of economics, Jahangirnagar University

BENEATH THE SURFACE
"A broad-based rural development rather than a narrowly focussed agricultural development is absolutely essential for poverty reduction for an extremely land scarce country such as Bangladesh". It is the expansion of the non-farm sector that has been contributing most to the incremental incomes of the poor and it is the non-farm sector that has to bear the burden in the foreseeable future.

face of shortage of space, however, I would attempt to highlight only few of the important observations. Agriculture appeared to have augmented well in the 1990s. Reportedly, agricultural income grew at 3.5 per cent annually in the 1990s compared to 2.6 per cent over the previous two decades. And the ripples of the rural dynamics -- created through forward and backward linkages -- contributed substantially to the overall uplift of the economy. *Inso facto*, the national income grew at 5.3 per cent compared to 4.1 per cent during 1974-90. On the other hand, the population growth rate halved to account for 1.5 per cent in 1990s as against 3 per cent at the time of independence. The agricultural growth was fueled, *inter alia*, by the diversification in crop production activities. In the set of agriculture, the income growth in the fisheries subset stood at about 8 per cent in 1990s to outshine a feeble 2.3 per cent of that two decades ago. The income from another subset, livestock activities, continued to grow at a robust rate of 7 per cent. Forestry sub-sector crawled with a moderate rate of about 4 per cent during the same period of time. **Noteworthy is the observation that the share of livestock, fisheries and forestry in agricultural incomes has more than doubled (44 per cent in 2000/2001 from 20 per cent in 1973/74).**

Size of the spilled milk!
Allow me to add an anecdote here. In a recent paper on corruption in Bangladesh titled: "Estimating the Effects of Corruption: Implications

period would have resulted in per capita GNP of between US\$524-587 (in 1995 constant US\$) in 1997 compared to its per capita GNP of US\$350." In other words, the per capita income level that we have been asking for reducing poverty could easily come from a reduction in corruption by a moderate margin. In other words, resource management, and perhaps, not resource making, should have been the principal motto of our journey towards growth and development.

Cereal and non-cereal production
But farmers in Bangladesh continue to fuel the engine of growth. In the face of almost stagnant supply of land over the decades -- hovering around 10-11 million ha -- rice production in paddy units stood at 38 million tons in 2000/01 compared with 14 million tons before independence and 18 million tons in early 1970s. This implied a growth rate of 2.6 per cent per annum as against the population growth rate of 1.5 per cent. Rice production per capita increased to 194 kg (milled rice) in 2000/01 compared to 151 kg before independence. But poverty persists because of the lack of exchange entitlements. However, the dark side of the development so far is the lack of crop diversification which went to constrain overall agricultural development. Respectable growth in the production of wheat, potato and vegetables emerged as a boon but substantial slash in the areas under jute, sugarcane, pulses and oilseeds remained as a bane. As a result, scarce foreign exchanges are being used up

demand for modern inputs; (b) demand for services -- processing, storage and marketing; (c) demand for trade, transport, construction, education, health services etc. as farm households spend a large proportion of incremental income for purchasing non-farm goods and services. An IRR/BIDS survey data show that during 1987-2000 period, employment in the rural non-farm sector grew at 4.5 per cent per annum while the number of workers employed in agriculture declined by nearly 1.2 per cent per year. The agricultural income growth during the same period was by 1.4 per cent whereas household income growth was by about 4 per cent, mainly due to a robust rise in the growth rate of non-farm income at 7 per cent per annum during the same period of time. And most of the rise originated from services, trade and business and rural transport operations.

Pervasive poverty, declining proportion!
Dr. Mahabub Hossain accepts the premise of the pervasive presence of poverty in Bangladesh. However, he attempted to show that the proportion of people under poverty line declined over the years. Citing an independent estimate by the BIDS based on the repeated household survey, the author observed a reduction from 59 per cent in 1983/84 to 51 per cent in 1994/95 and further to 44 per cent in 2000. That is, 15 percentage points reduction of poverty over a 15 year period (or one percentage point a year) can hardly be a coin for consolation. Bangladesh is lagging far behind

per cent in 1999 from 60 per cent in 1990; adult literacy rate was up to 53 per cent from 37 per cent; the access to safe drinking water increased from 40 per cent to 84 per cent etc.

Rising resilience
The most important improvement over the years -- as Dr Mahabub Hossain could observe -- has been in terms of the growth of resilience of the people to face natural calamities. There are many factors, which have helped increase capacity to cope with natural calamities like droughts and floods. For example, the area under pre-monsoon *aus* rice that has traditionally been subject to drought has been reduced by nearly 2 million ha and diverted to HYV paddy or vegetables and fruits production. The risk of loss from *amon* production due to drought was again reduced following the availability of supplementary irrigation facilities (thanks to the availability of shallow tubewells) and the area under deep water *amon* rice declined from 2.2 million ha. to 0.7 million ha. Thus losses from abnormal floods that farmers were faced with for ages came to low levels. The *boro* area has increased from 0.5 to 4 million ha over the last three decades. Taking wheat into consideration, 55 per cent of the cereal harvest now takes place during May-June period. So, the loss from rice output owing to flood or drought could easily be covered up in few months. Thus insecurity and vulnerability of earlier periods came down as a result of the year round production structure.

Lessons from Akshardham: Smugness isn't strategy

PRAFUL BIDWAI writes from New Delhi

THE ending of the terrorist takeover of Gandhinagar's Swaminarayan temple has understandably produced widespread relief. But there is self-congratulation in the Gujarat government and the Union home ministry over the National Security Guards "professionally" killing the terrorists and the Gujarat police preventing communal trouble.

On critical assessment, one can only say "two cheers" to the NSG, and at best "one cheer" to the Gujarat government.

The NSG is undoubtedly our best-trained and -equipped commando force, with a well-deserved reputation for valour. Unlike the police, it is meant to *overpower* hostage-takers, i.e. capture them *alive*.

The NSG encircled the two culprits well after they stopped shooting. But instead of using stun-grenades, it pumped 106 bullets into them. Thus, it lost an opportunity to collect evidence about their origins, organisational links, training and funding.

Such evidence can make or break the government's case that Pakistan is behind all big-time terrorism in India. "Live", hard, concrete, evidence alone can convince the public of this -- as opposed to *ex-post* evidence such as notes in Urdu and cinema tickets. Because they lack irrefutable evidence, the Indian police have repeatedly failed to secure the deportation or extradition of crimi-

nals. The police contained the Akshardham fallout because Mr Narendra Modi did not prevent them from doing what they are duty-bound to do. Unlike on February 27/28, they took fire-fighting measures, protected minorities, rounded up suspects, and set up armed pickets.

retribution-counter-violence.

The Swaminarayan sect is associated with the affluent Patel community, which was active in the anti-Muslim pogrom. The Gujarat government has promoted what former DGP Julio F. Ribeiro calls "the politics of hate". So long as this continues, he says, "pitting communities against each other can only breed insecurity".

Despite Mr Vajpayee's assertion that terrorism is on its "death-bed", it has actually grown. The Intelligence Bureau has disclosed that 2,800 suspected terrorists were killed last year. But a year on, India is more insecure. This demands a new approach... It is the state's duty to protect innocent citizens against terrorists. But it must protect them against communalists too... It is also its duty to address the root-causes of widespread social discontent.

This only proves that the administration can prevent communal disturbances when it wants to. No large-scale violence can occur without its nod.

Why did Mr Modi behave better?

The presence of Mr Advani and Mr Vajpayee, missing post-Godhra, helped. But the main reason was simply that the BJP *didn't* want communal trouble.

Besides international outrage, this would invite postponement of the Assembly elections. The relatively good outcome comes from a *bad*, dishonourable reason.

Mr Advani's self-congratulatory tone about Akshardham is wrong. That the episode occurred at all shows that Gujarat remains trapped in a vicious cycle of violence-

causes. What is needed is a three-fold combination: short-term action to deal impartially with violence (the "symptoms"); medium-term policies to rectify biases in state agencies; and long-term remedies to win people's hearts and minds.

In India, there is over-emphasis on the short-term, only half-hearted pursuit of medium-term measures, and absence of the will even to try out long-term approaches. The Northeast, Punjab, Kashmir are all examples of this strategy. The Centre wakes up to the Northeast only when there is large-scale violence -- not just 10 or 15 deaths!

A fourth of India's military budget is spent on Kashmir, but not even a thousandth on relief to violence's victims.

Such circumstances exist in large parts of India -- certainly in Gujarat. That's why terrorists don't have to be "outsiders". The extreme alienation of vulnerable groups creates insecurity for all.

No successful anti-terrorist strategy can fail to recognise such alienation, or address its root-

causes. What is needed is a three-fold combination: short-term action to deal impartially with violence (the "symptoms"); medium-term policies to rectify biases in state agencies; and long-term remedies to win people's hearts and minds.

In India, there is over-emphasis on the short-term, only half-hearted pursuit of medium-term measures, and absence of the will even to try out long-term approaches. The Northeast, Punjab, Kashmir are all examples of this strategy. The Centre wakes up to the Northeast only when there is large-scale violence -- not just 10 or 15 deaths!

A fourth of India's military budget is spent on Kashmir, but not even a thousandth on relief to violence's victims.

Police corruption and sloth ensure that the vast majority of our heinous crime cases remain unsolved -- as in Fourth World countries, or in Pakistan, where the success rate is under three per cent in recent bomb attacks.

Imbalances in the official approach to terrorism have worsened. Since 9/11, India has emulated US-style Rambo methods,

integrating the neglected second and third components of the strategy outlined above. It is the state's duty to protect innocent citizens against terrorists. But it must protect them against communalists too -- which it doesn't. It is also its duty to address the root-causes of widespread social discontent.

Our states cannot wield draconian powers without undermining freedom. People like Mr Advani entertain the illusion that they resemble Sardar Patel. The result is a terrible caricature. We are paying for the pseudo-Sardar's vanity.

This is reflected in the evolving official vocabulary: Thus, after the J&K Assembly attack, India warned Pakistan its "patience" is running out. After December 13, it threatened to "liquidate" all terrorists -- wherever they are.

The NDA government is frustrated that the US won't permit a "limited" India-Pakistan war. Any conflict could escalate to the nuclear level, with unspokeable consequences. The frustration has grown, as Pakistan, according to *The New*

York Times, has resumed limited support to cross-border militancy. Frustration is at the root of irrational official statements, including Mr Advani's remarks on the media and "mangled corpses".

Official optimism over Abu Salem's deportation is uncalled-for. If the man is deported, it won't be because the Indian police have done their homework, but because the US has put heavy political pressure on Portugal.

Despite Mr Vajpayee's assertion that terrorism is on its "death-bed", it has actually grown. The Intelligence Bureau has disclosed that 2,800 suspected terrorists were killed last year. But a year on, India is more insecure.

This demands a new approach, integrating the neglected second and third components of the strategy outlined above. It is the state's duty to protect innocent citizens against terrorists. But it must protect them against communalists too -- which it doesn't. It is also its duty to address the root-causes of widespread social discontent.

Our states cannot wield draconian powers without undermining freedom. People like Mr Advani entertain the illusion that they resemble Sardar Patel. The result is a terrible caricature. We are paying for the pseudo-Sardar's vanity.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Insecured ward commissioner

If someone started to read the newspaper of Bangladesh for the first time after the death of the 2 commissioners, one would think that murder is new in Bangladesh! Suddenly the Mayor and BNP politicians think that the Home Minister is not getting his/her job done. They have put the blame on badly trained police.

But I am a Bangladeshi who reads the newspaper everyday. I have read of more gruesome act of violence all too long but didn't heard a single word from Mayor Khoka or the BNP leaders regarding inefficiency of the Home Ministry. Or is it they think the police is to protect the BNP politicians only and not the people?

And before blaming the police (who no doubt will win Corrupt Cop of Universe pageant) will Mayor Khoka kindly inform me how can police arrest the criminals when they are

sheltered by the GOVERNMENT themselves?

The best definition of morality that I could get was something similar to--morality is not something that makes your life easy. But it is something, which if no one follows then the society becomes unliveable. The political parties of Bangladesh think they can be as immoral as they want and yet they will be immune from almost everything by use of power! But they should consider the fact that with the myriad instances of immorality the country is producing a lot more immoral people. At the end that will make the society unliveable for all. Political parties should stop and think what their money will do if they end up with an immoral progeny. Please think of the country.

Talat Islam
On e-mail

The way people have reacted to the murder of ward commissioners was

very surprising. A lot of people complained about the use of police resources to protect "criminal" officials. It appears that people want to get rid of corrupt leaders, which isn't a bad idea. However, it is wise for Bangladesh public to simply bury their head in the sand and hope for the best?

It would be lot more beneficial to the whole of Bangladesh, if people got involved in politics (in a professional manner, rather than *hartal* and vandalism) and brought some change in Bangladesh's corrupt politics.

Azad Miah
Oldham, UK

I am in complete sympathy with the readers who feel no remorse at the death of the "criminal" ward commissioners. As an outsider with many Bangladeshi friends, I cringe on their behalf whenever I come across this oxymoron in Bangladeshi newspapers. It is

obvious that these criminals are knocking each other off-- the first signs of an imploding system, obviously revolving around pure greed and rapacity. History has shown that crime is not a "sustainable" precept. Political benefactors who think otherwise are in for a rude shock. Let us not waste time and (newspaper) space on these dregs of society-- even mentioning their name is giving them too much attention.

Gingro Capet
On e-mail

Abusing domestic helpers
The news of the killing of a housemaid and subsequent dumping of the dead-body in a jungle by her master appalled all conscientious people (October 5). We want an exemplary punishment for the perpetrators so that it would be a good lesson for compulsive maid-abusers everywhere. If the maid is not performing well, then the maid and her owner should both try

ways amicably instead of resorting to physical torture. I know all maids are not angels. But abuse in any form cannot be condoned. We need to eradicate ills of our society one by one.

Also, those human rights organisations of Bangladesh, who are so concerned about the 'maltreatment' of Bangladeshi workers in the Middle East, should turn their attention towards our own home first by voicing their concern and taking up steps to stop maid-abuse in Bangladesh.

Shukla Mirza
On e-mail

"Fuel-less electricity generator"
I was amused and saddened at Mr. Haidar's letter (October 2). Amused because he is filled with confusions and does not know what is actually bothering him. Saddened because if this is the calibre of associate professors--God help us!

Mr. Haidar has talked about "scientific comment" and "refusal to submit" their work. Scientist Huda has already submitted his work for patent, hasn't he? So why use superfluous words and waste precious time! Mr. Associate Professor perhaps forgot to read the letters column of the daily "Ittefaq" of 14.09.02. Please do update your information. In this letter the inventor has referred to the fact that secrecy of his theory was being preserved, true, but at the same time an invitation was made to all physicists for an open discussion. And I've heard NONE CAME!

I am extremely curious to know how anyone, without even knowing about a theory, can categorically claim that the theory is wrong? Mr. Haidar further says that laws of physics "have never found any evidence of such changes", can anyone thus conclude that these laws can never therefore undergo any change? Things meant for the trashcan should go to the trashcan,

that's why they are there, aren't they?

What is really humorous about this letter is the author's intense sense of fear. What would happen if...? What is Mr. Haidar really frightened of-- scientist Huda's invention being proved true?

In conclusion I would like to make two requests to the letter writer:

1. Please take the effort of giving empirical evidence to whatever you claim, for that is all the truth that science requires.

2. Please read the works of H. G. Wells to perceive how much of "science fiction" can become reality.

Good Luck to scientist Huda. I envision a better Bangladesh too!

A Positive Bangladeshi
Dhaka

Bangladesh cricket
The whole nation was dancing with joy when Bangladesh attained the honour of Test status. Our thoughts were running too high. It is not unreasonable to think that if we can

attain Test status we can be ICC champion one day. At the initial stage we don't expect any miracle. But our grave concern is that we are going too much down and too quickly. To add to that no body in administration seems to be very bothered about the whole issue.

We hear news of misappropriation of billions of taka in different government departments. Why can't we spend some of it in getting the best coach for cricket, as this is the only game in which we reached international standard. There is no substitute for good coach who has vast international all-round experience.

I would request the government and the cricket organisers of the country to act now. Don't let us down any more, you might not bother but we

Dr M.M Islam
On e-mail