

Transparency in Bangladesh

A forlorn hope for the country

HAFEEJUL ALAM

THAT the transparency situation in Bangladesh has since vitiated the total system of governance does not make a news any more, for it is evident to all and sundry that the establishment has since put on a nasty tag of "most corrupt in the world" bestowed by none other than the Transparency International for the last three consecutive years. However, if sincere efforts are not initiated to remove "that tag" and if a sort of ostrich policy pervades all over, we would continue to attract not only news but the tear-jerking ones, letting down our image as also smashing up our already-impoverished economy.

Then again, things get worse when the distinguished foreign dignitaries point to our messy situation in unmistakable terms. Thus, in a recent meeting with the leaders of the BGMEA, the visiting US Congressman Joseph F. Crowley remarked, "The lack of transparency in awarding contracts is an issue affecting trade and investment in Bangladesh, and all these are leaving a negative impression on the US." It is worth mentioning here that the US is the second largest buyer of the Bangladeshi garments and Bangladesh enjoys a highly favorable trade-balance with that country. Needless to say, the situation may be reversed any time, if we don't bother to improve our standing. From the BGMEA source, we could learn that Bangladesh's export to the US has already reduced by 18% in 2003 compared to 2001 in terms of value.

Although we are getting wide media coverage about the prevalent sleazes which include the names of no less than the important cabinet ministers, there is hardly any official press note on the reported issues except for indulging ministerial commentaries, as if our government machinery is as neat as a new pin. In a recent move, the Chairmen of the 44-law-maker headed parliamentary standing committees have reportedly united to ask the government to give them more power to make sure that their recommendations are implemented. They reported that "corruption goes unchecked and remedial recommendations are not implemented, as the ministries don't provide the committees with documents." Needless to say, this points to the Achilles' heel inherent in the system of the governance. A business leader in a recent meeting has very rightly observed that crime in Bangladesh has become "a profitable business" much to the frustration of the foreign investors. This may sound grotesque, but reveals the stark truth about our national life. The

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politico-economic nexus is shaping the society in such a way that only the crime and dishonest practices thrive and there is no incentive to be decent and honest.

After two years of intense examination of the irregularities in government expenditure, the seven-member commission called Public Expenditure Review Commission (PERC) headed by M. Hafizuddin Khan has done a splendid job for the nation, by not only revealing the sordid details of the transparency situation of Bangladesh but also suggesting for an up-front and corrective recipe. The government-appointed body blamed the waste of the Prime Minister's relief fund on to the lack of transparency and recommended punishment to the persons responsible for wasting state funds in the name of "beautification and development" of Dhaka Airport Road.

The commission categorically reported that the three constitutional committees of the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) could not ensure accountability and transparency in public expenditure and remove corruption in state organizations and identified "lack of political commitment and unwillingness to add zest to parliamentary norms and culture as the

reasons for stalemate in the constitutional bodies." The commission's recommendations also included such matters as discouraging state iftar parties and downsizing the number of ministries. However, the most dramatic one was the winding up of the PMO office on the raison d'être that in a parliamentary system of government, the Prime Minister normally operates through the cabinet division and that the measure would not only help avoid over-centralisation, but would go a long way in controlling the public fund.

As a direct consequence of lack of transparency and accountability, the economy is slumping down day by day. There appears to be no sign of any upturn, nor there is any visible effort to improve the situation. Catchy slogans and stunning public speeches can't provide for the millions, nor those can lead to any growth pattern. According to the recent interim report on "The State of the Bangladesh Economy in the Fiscal Year 2003-2004 prepared by the CPD (Centre for Policy Dialogue), the economy is "depressed by marginal growth in the manufacturing sector, low level of FDI inflow, net outflow of agricultural credit, transitory bubbles in the capital market, paralysis in the

privatization process, slowdown in the remittance flow, and, last but not the least, the perceptible price-hike of essential commodities." If we look at the economic giants of Asia like China, Malaysia, South Korea or even at India and Sri Lanka, we would find that the crucial element of their rapid economic growth was nothing but massive foreign investment. In the year 2001, the total Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Bangladesh was to the tune of US \$ 79 million and in 2002, the amount got trimmed down to US \$ 45 million and presently it is all time low and there is no scope to mystify the situation by statistical juggling.

Obviously, the saner people from every strata of the society are extremely distressed at this moribund trend. While combating corruption is considered a crucial step in stimulating FDI as also the economic growth, it's almost impossible to contain corruption or maintain transparency without a political will. No gain in saying the fact that a pragmatic and statesmanlike approach could bring about a sweeping development in the total transparency scenario, having a far-reaching effect on our path to progress and growth. In this respect, the success story of the

National Accountability Bureau of Pakistan could be set as an example before the policy-makers of Bangladesh. As suggested by the different development partners, setting up of a totally independent anti-corruption body without any governmental interference could also go a long way to deal with the corrupt practices. After all, sincere efforts are necessary to contain the massive corruption in the society and if a system of transparency could be established at the top, the bottom would automatically adjust itself with the same.

As a first step, the cabinet-members of the government and top officials could be asked to periodically declare their assets and properties including the sources of possession. The system of nomination for parliament members by the political parties could be made open and transparent and subject to audit by the Election Commission. The political parties too could be registered with the election commission and their fund positions periodically audited. The structural checks and balance between the executive, the judiciary, and the parliament as is found in the Westminster type of democracy could be established, ensuring total independence of the judiciary. The parliamentary standing committees could also be vested with adequate powers to deal with the sordid state of different ministries and public bodies.

However, from the objective situation as available in the country, it would be a sheer reverie even to think that the required political will would be spontaneously forthcoming to make transparency and accountability come about and that everything would be okay in the country in the foreseeable future. That the recently published 340-page report of the Public Expenditure Review Commission (PERC) would hit the nail on the head of the establishment was expected. What is not expected is the political will to sincerely go through the report and implement the recommendations contained therein, for the way the present regime has been conducting itself for the past two and a half years would not suggest that at all.

So long the establishment, with their brute majority in the parliament, would foster the attitude that "the king can do no wrong" and put on show a supine indifference to the prevalent widespread corruption and so long the reported sleazes of the ministries and public bodies would not go through the necessary judicial inquiries revealing the correct picture, the nation would be ill with abysmal image-crisis with a forlorn hope for the economy.

The author is a management specialist.

India is still learning, after 57 years

ERSHAD KHANDKER

THE social and political "landscape" of a country determines the course of its economy. By landscape we do not mean the shape of the earth in a country. The national make-up across the board is the question. India has taken it slow, building, rebuilding and then finally constructing the foundation of its progress. Soul searching is the building part. Independence brings an identity crisis. India embarked on a socialist course. What a strange thing to do in a country with a high degree of commitment toward discipline and academic excellence. But the Indian leaders knew that going it slow and starting work with the basics at hand was the safer thing to do. The state-controlled economic system was easier to understand and even easier to preach. State control meant control in the hands of the people. The aim was to maximise gains and then consolidate position.

Socialism allowed the Indian society to remain humble and disciplined as successive governments tried and tested the home-grown policy where indigenous industry was encouraged and education was made the cornerstone. There was no need to urge the people to tilt toward education as urban India managed to learn and then excel in academia quite by habit, while the rural India was too poor to make headway. Overall, the socialist economy meant that growth was slow and the stranglehold of poverty was not being tested. However, some would say that at least no side effect of the market economy: no large-scale unemployment as a result of restructuring and layoff, corporate greed, inequality and social discontent existed.

These are issues at best peripheral in nature. After all India at that time looked like being time-warped in mid-flight. The state of public utilities was in shambles, telephone system never worked, communication was difficult and that meant that large-scale venture capitalism was impossible to initiate. As long as the infrastructure was not improved and the private sector not allowed to create new opportunities, it was clear that the state-owned economy would be unable to absorb the new graduates that were coming into the economy in need of work.

The political system in the post-independence India, dominated by towering personalities was one-dimensional, no one dared to speak out against the state-controlled economy, since it was the preferred choice of the leaders who played a part in the struggle for independence. The market forces not playing a part in the economy meant that large ineffectual state-owned companies were not making any profit but were actually a drain on the national budget.

A bloated bureaucracy, a closed economy with scant support for private entrepreneurship was

keeping India back. Defeat of communism and the desperate condition of the economy convinced India that the economy should be driven by market forces. Currency laws were liberalised and fiscal policy was reorganised, banking laws were modernised, price control loosened, and the ground was ready to allow for large-scale foreign investment. India is still far from a fully capitalist economy. In fact,

own potential. But the famed exploits in software, the dedication to doing the basics right is commendable. The awareness of the importance of technology was felt acutely after independence, and the Indian institute of technology was established in 1952. The economy might not have opened up at that time but the onus was on creating an educated work force. This was a strategic decision meant to create a savvy workforce that

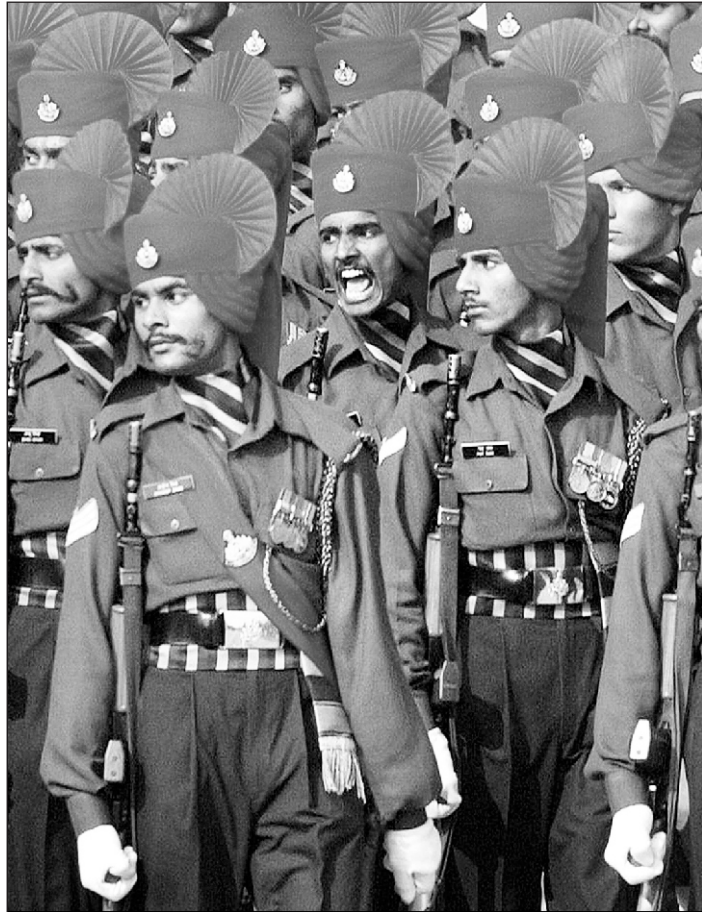


PHOTO: AFP

Indian soldiers march during a military parade for India's Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi yesterday.

China is going ahead with faster reforms with a dynamic stock exchange and daring innovations that encourage foreign equity in locally owned industries, reforms in banking that are bolder and more effective and restraint on corruption that is increasing investor confidence. Above all, Chinese technological advancement competes with India and outstrips it in all but software innovations.

India has always thought best to work at its own pace. The country is spiritual, democratic and introspective. Demagoguery may have its vestiges in its political system as corruption and slow pace of reform indicate as much. However, India continues to have respect for its own traditions and will open up its shores to foreigners slowly and on its own terms.

The country is still not aware of its

would help build a defence apparatus, which could meet the need for a technologically advanced defence system. Of course, the utility of technology in other sectors was also taken into consideration and more institutes of technology have been built ever since.

The report card is a mixed one. There is no doubt that India had the potential to do much well. Indians, in the urban and educated cities, are oriented to academic pursuit. When given the ground, they can be very opportunistic and ambitious. The millions of millionaires of Indian origin prove that point. The economy has done well in as much as industrialization is concerned. Improvement in ICT and general industry has been supersonic. The country is poised to move forward.

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Our education quagmire

SA MANSOOR

EDUCATION is the harbinger of development. To come out of our deteriorating national trend in most social, moral and economic yardstick, improvement in education has to be the primary objective. In terms of investment and resources, this is the area which needs united and focused attention irrespective of political ideology. I believe politician of any party will agree, that as a nation, we should and must, give full and united focus towards improving education. As Bangladeshis, we must sink our political differences, stop blaming one another, and set out in earnest to salvage and set right this important and critical national responsibility. I hope this presentation may initiate the necessary interaction with participation of all. As a responsible citizen, with an earnest desire to improve our lot, I believe that the following basic issues among others should be addressed in our national interest, to ensure that quality of education is not sacrificed.

1. Divorce main line political alignment from all area of education at the student, teacher and at all levels starting from primary school up to the highest tier of University education. Not that students who have attained the age to vote should be politically ignorant, but so long as they are students they must keep away from direct political and party involvement ignoring their basic duty of gathering knowledge. We could take up political issues and if possible encourage sound, reasonable political debating which may be a part of relevant curriculum at the appropriate level.

2. We must shun unfair means in all sphere associated with education. The unfortunate trend of unfair means adopted in examinations should be stopped; without fear or favour. Not that it would be totally eliminated; but at least it should be visibly nonexistent. This also applies with

respect to selection of teachers and selection of students for admission at higher and technical levels of education. No interference or patronage in this critical function is to be tolerated.

3. Our syllabus should be more practical oriented and practical subjects should be given required focus in allocation of time and resources in the curriculum; be it in Arts, Commerce or Science,

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syllabus up to undergraduate levels. Priority should be on creativity rather than output by rote.

4. English as an international language cannot be ignored. Excellence in verbal and written English will be an asset in the development and utilisation of our manpower globally. We are seriously lacking in this respect, and this needs to be corrected at the earliest. Our rank and level in overseas employment compared to neighbouring Asian countries can be the benchmark.

5. Financial allocation for education, both in development and revenue funds should get top priority. Money spent on education is the essential investment for national growth, and it should get the lions share of resources, possible even sacrificing some of our other needs. National priorities of needs have to be rethought and the importance of long-term quality education must be given the topmost priority.

6. Salary and wages for teachers and all persons in the education sector has to be enhanced.

To discourage private teaching a commensurate special pay or allowance should be given. Coaching as needed should be given to regular students of the institution. Component of tutorial and improvement classes should be encouraged to improve overall student standards. As comparison; if we can afford to provide subsidised ration and other benefits to the police and armed forces; then

why not to the teachers the future builders of the nation?

7. The role and function of the school and college inspectors have to be more comprehensive. Their manpower has to be expanded to cover the growth in educational institutions and with increase in the scope of their involvement in the education process. These officials are the backbone to monitor and audit the quality of performance of our educational institutions and thus improve the quality of education.

These are some of the thoughts and ideas that comes to mind. To initiate this very real and crying need of improvement in our education sector, we must give it the highest priority. This must be reinforced with substantial overall investment to make it worthwhile. It is probably the only national direction which can lead us out of the progressive deterioration in our quality of life as a nation. It is our moral duty to be involved in this important need of the hour, and raise us out of the quagmire.

Lowering irrigation costs

A key to sustainable agriculture

MAHBUB ALAM

IRRIGATION has contributed to achieving self-sufficiency of food grain for Bangladesh. Rice and wheat production has increased due to an increase in irrigated rice and wheat acreage during dry season. Wet season rice yield per hectare has also improved due to supplemental irrigation that removes stress from lack of timely rain.

The cost of irrigation at \$51 per hectare (Hossain and Deb, 2003) in Bangladesh is the highest compared to neighbouring countries. Irrigation cost per hectare in India and Thailand is around \$18. On the contrary, the human and animal labour costs at \$231 per hectare is higher in West Bengal, India, as compared to \$181 in Bangladesh, according to Hossain and Deb (2003). Eighty percent of dry-land irrigation in Bangladesh is from shallow pumps run by diesel. Diesel price in Bangladesh is also lower compared to West Bengal. These numbers tell us that irrigation cost should be lower in Bangladesh. So, we may conclude that the amount of water pumped by a Bangladeshi farmer is greater compared to a farmer in West Bengal and Thailand, which raises the cost. The increased pumping does not translate into an increased production. Rice yield of 4.83 tons per hectare in Bangladesh is slightly lower than 4.86 tons per hectare in India. We may see the effect of this in the open market. Rice from India finds its way into Bangladesh market. To remain sustainable, the Bangladeshi farmer has to reduce the cost of production. It is obvious from the information presented above that the cost of irrigation need lowering in Bangladesh. This is only possible by being efficient water managers.

Efficient irrigation managers need to know how much water to apply and when. To help in developing these skills the farmers need to acquire knowledge on crop water use and soil water holding characteristics of their field. This knowledge helps him or her in

applying water according to the amount needed by crop and thereby reducing pumping cost. Timely application according to critical stage of crop growth will ensure profitable return. However, to implement proper irrigation scheduling, the water managers or

known as evapo-transpiration (ET) is dependent on weather condition. Sun light causes the stomata (microscopic openings) of leaves to open through which water moves out of the plant to the atmosphere. Water from soil extracted by roots continuously move up

from leaves. Weather stations provide temperature, sunlight, relative humidity, and wind data that are used in an empirical equation to calculate crop water use. Technologists have developed simplified devices based on scientific findings that may be used by

from which water escapes to atmosphere due to sunlight, heat, relative humidity or dryness of air, and wind. The amount of water loss from the gage may be observed on the glass tube that is attached to the ET gage (atmometer) cylinder to indicate the water level.

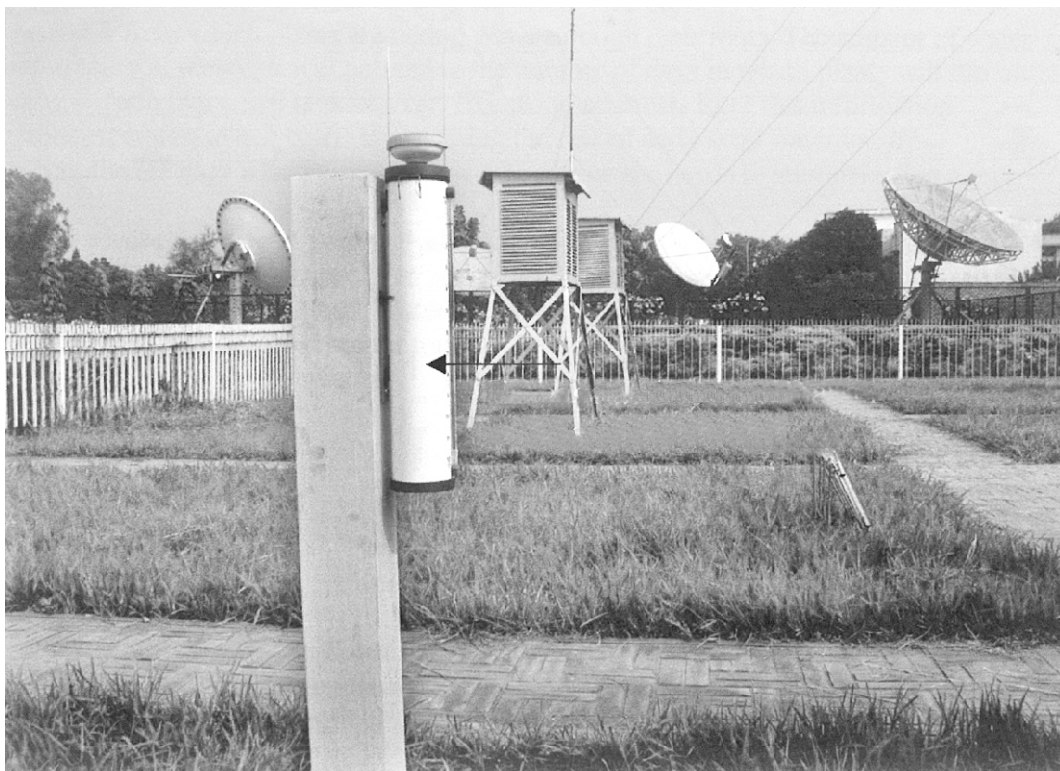
An ET gage has been set up at Agargaon Abhawa Bhaban weather yard in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to calibrate the same with the crop water use (evapotranspiration) calculated by using weather data of the same weather station.

Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council and Abhawa Department are jointly conducting a study to correlate the observed water loss from ET gage with the calculated evapotranspiration under the supervision of the author. If found suitable these devices may be set up on the basis of region at research stations from where the information may be provided to farmers by agricultural extension scientists.

Each soil type has a water holding capacity. This capacity determines the size of the water reservoir from which crop plants are taking water through their roots. The amount of water stored in this soil reservoir will determine in how many days plants will run out of water much like a fuel tank in a car. Extension scientists have this information available according to soil type. By knowing the rate of daily crop water use by observing the ET gage a farmer may know when he or she needs to start irrigating again.

Irrigating according to plant need and adjusting the amount of water to apply each time according to water holding capacity of soil a farmer may reduce pumping. In this way the cost of irrigation may be reduced. Water managers and farmers need to be trained. Extension scientists also need proper training to equip them selves to be conversant on the use of water balance technique.

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Picture showing an ET gage in the foreground established at the weather yard of Abhawa Bhaban at Agargaon in Dhaka.

farmers need tools. These tools fall in two categories, physical equipments and management techniques.

Physical tools like lining of canals or using PVC pipes reduce water loss from conveyance and distribution. Use of valves (automated or manual) help in better control of water. Tools that help in knowing how much water a crop has used are valuable in scheduling irrigation. Crop water use also

through the stem and out through leaves. This process keeps physiologic processes to continue and maintain plant growth. This also helps keep plant cool during hot dry days, which is necessary for the metabolic processes to function. Scientists have developed mathematical equations to correlate weather condition to the actual crop water use. Temperature, dryness of air (relative humidity), sunlight, and wind movement affects the rate of escape of water

farmers directly to determine crop water use without the complication of mathematics. One such device or tool is an atmometer or ET gage.

An ET gage measures the amount of water that evaporates to the atmosphere from a wet porous ceramic cup surface, which has been covered with a green fabric to provide a similar resistance and surface reflectance (albedo) of crop leaves. This device mimics a plant