

## Deaths in river -- again!

### Lessons never learned

WE are aghast at the cheapening of human lives brought poignantly home by the fatal capsizing of two launches in the river Meghna on Sunday. The vessels were overturned by a strong wind at a river-point where mishaps have taken place with routine regularity over the last decade. Two other launches also sank on the same night near Paturia river terminal, but no casualties were reported.

The launch disasters in 2003 almost brought the river transportation system to a standstill as the number of victims in major capsizes was appallingly high. The government formed probe committees and there were apparently some energetic attempts to get at the root of the disastrous situation. A number of things like faulty designs of the vessels, inexperience of launch operators, overloading and breaches of all kinds of navigational rules surfaced after the probe bodies started digging. There was some tough bargaining between the launch owners and the government over passenger safety. But all of this has produced virtually nothing in terms of the safety of passengers and no report of the probe bodies has been made public so that the accountability exercise went completely by default. Needless to say, nobody has been punished for the loss of a huge number of lives, nor is it in public knowledge that compensations have been paid. In other words, it was basically a seasonal hype that fizzled out as soon as the dusts settled.

The emphasis on strict adherence to navigational rules came to naught. The launches categorized according to their river-worthiness proved to be an exercise in futility as the standards were not applied. As if to prove the point, MV 'Lighting Sun', one of the two launches that went down in Meghna, was in 'B' category i.e. unfit for undertaking the journey it hazarded. In fact, the craft sailed into the stormy zone, despite people warning the crew about the possible danger. The question is, will the clearly identifiable culprits be punished?

There was the talk of installing modern weather monitoring devices in the river vessels. That has not been done so far; and what is particularly worrying is that the launch owners have no sense of danger otherwise inherent in the lack of rudimentary safety equipment.

The government should not rest content with forming a probe body to find out the causes behind the latest launch disasters, but also make sure that its recommendations are made public and implemented without ado.

## Insufferable

### Is he a fugitive or an assisted escapee?

IN spite of the reported directives by the Prime Minister to arrest Bangla Bhai, he remains at large at the time of writing. It was reprehensible to see his men defiantly flaunt their strength under the eyes of the law enforcing agencies through the streets of Rajshahi Sunday last.

Understandably the saner elements in the cabinet had expressed their resentment at the way that this group has been allowed to act and questioned the legality of its actions.

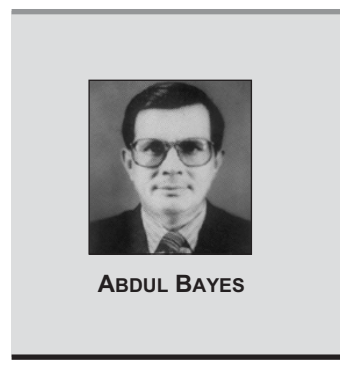
Since the story of his murderous activity, ostensibly to cleanse the area of the Sarbahara emerged we have been calling for the arrest of the leader and the disbandment of the group. He has not only taken up the law in his own hands, he has also conducted public executions of alleged members of underground gang. He is reported to have drawn up a fresh hit-list, which includes former legislators, and UP chairmen.

More proof of the horrendous activity of the JMJM led by the so-called 'Bangla Bhai' came to light the other day through the pictures of one of their victims, strung from a tree. Both the picture and the description of the activities of the murderous gang created revulsion in the readers' mind.

One is surprised by the statements of the police suggesting they couldn't arrest Bangla Bhai because that they didn't receive any orders for it. Why need orders to apprehend lawbreakers and criminals, unless of course what he has been doing was at some body else's bidding, who also happened to be in the echelons of the 'higher authority'? There couldn't have been any dearth of evidence against this man to put him behind bars.

The government couldn't afford an indifferent approach to the matter that involved sinister religio-political agenda without sending a self-deprecating signal across. At the risk of being repetitious, therefore, we again urge the government to arrest 'Bangla Bhai' and order his group disbanded.

# Technology, entitlement and freedom of choice



ABDUL BAYES

NOT long ago, the Nobel laureate in economics, Amartya Sen, described development as expansion of the set of choice of the people. Beggars should not be choosers, goes the adage, with the implications that at pitifully low level of income, people have to prefer either 'this' or 'that' commodity bundle but not both. Economists call it a 'corner' solution in indifference curve analysis of consumers, generally taught in first year economics classes. But as the income goes up, people tend to have a choice among commodity bundles to saddle at a point where the budget line (a proxy for ability) is tangent to the indifference curve (a proxy for preference). Quite obviously, a tangent solution is preferable to a corner solution as far as consumer welfare is concerned.

Technology adoption in agricultural practices could be one of the keys to raising income, other things being equal, and the rise in income could alter the matrix of choices faced by the households or consumers. First, technology for the very poor enables entitlement by increasing supply of food (for the poor, production itself is entitlement as they consume what they produce) and then enhancement of entitlement could lead to a variety of choices that the poor could hardly think of in the pre-technology state. To this effect, I shall cite a few instances from field visits in one of the villages of Bangladesh.

### The village

Possibly 70 km north of Dhaka lies Sreepur village. In conventional perspective, it should be dubbed as a developed village with pucca roads passing by it and the village having access to electricity. I am told that the village falls under Sreepur pourashava (municipality) and therefore the village has access to all the facilities that a pourashava should provide. The wage rate in the village ranges from Tk.100 to 120

assets.

### A tenant and a training

Allow me to introduce Abdul Kader who lost his father at childhood and the grand father deprived him of the due share from inheritance. He has no education. A born landless Abdul Kader has been striving hard for decades to feed seven members through renting in land. Of course, his eldest son contributes Tk.3000 a month working as a carpenter. But that is a peanut as his household

putting them on the pan of pails. They were heavily indebted to village mohajans, neighbours as the loaned money could not be utilised properly.

Fatema Begum, wife of Kader answered most of my queries. "For last four years, we did not borrow money for cultivation. Before that, we borrowed money from mohajans, say Tk 1000, to pay Tk.100 per month additional". During the last boro season, they sold seedlings worth Tk.3000,

the fields. "Ekkhuni cholen amar barit, bish thrish mon dhan achei" (just now accompany me to my house. Always there is 20-30 maunds of paddy).

### Choice set

What is the basic difference in the Kader family as it moved to the present state over the years. Fatema Begum replies supported by her husband and another pure tenant, Abdul Malek: Sir "I was a maid servant, now a farmer".

Fatema Begum and Salma Khatun, both wives of pure tenants always have smiles while talking. They visit fields occasionally just to see for themselves the output of their hard labour put in seed health activity. "Wives of rich farmers do not visit fields as they need not. We are poor. We must visit fields". I was told that their husbands now always discuss about seeds and agricultural practices with them. They are more discussed now than before. They have moved from food deficit to food surplus households.

### Seed and Eid

Why do you laugh so much while talking? I asked them seeing their happy faces. "Char bosor age aile ai hashi dehtema sir. Goto char bosor dhaira eid vab" (You would not have noticed a smile on our faces had you visited us four years back. For the last four years (after training and good yield) we always wear a festive look).

### From corner to centre

As we left Sreepur, I started recollecting what Fatema and Salma informed about their development over the years. Their production and food entitlement went up and at the same time, their set of choice expanded. Within a span of four years, they moved away from a situation of 'corner' solution to a position of 'tangency' solution. They can now, if they wish, buy rice as well as non-rice commodities. A training that engaged both men and women helped raise output substantially to put the poorest of the poor in a village on an even keel with others. To me, some developments as espoused by Amartya Sen seem to have happened in that village. The government and the donors need only expand the scale so that the households of Fatemas and Salmas reach doorsteps of development.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

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per day in busy season implying the scarcity of labour due, perhaps, to the expansion of non-farm activities. Any way, I met with about 20 male and female farmers who are poor in the scale of land endowments.

### Productive farmers

The set of farmers I met were trained on Seed Health Improvement. As could be gathered, simple techniques on growing and preservation were taught by BRRI under the aegis of IRRRI. The tools used were not of tall order, nor the cost of growing seeds compounded for that matter. Only the knowledge about how to grow, dry, preserve and use seedlings were the main essence of the training. Both males and females of the sample households had the access to the training. From the views of the farmers themselves, it appeared to me that the training on seed health turned their fortunes remarkably. Just four years back, most of them could meet rice needs from own farms only for six months. The rest used to be managed either by borrowing or by pulling rickshaw/vans or selling

requires 3-3.5kg/day of rice just to skip skeletons. In the justly finished Boro season, he cultivated four bighas (1 bigha=35 decimals) of land and in the last Aman season, six bighas. To repeat, all his cultivable lands were rented in to surrender of 50 per cent of the output to the owner. Like many others, Abdul Kader is a pure tenant in Sreepur village.

Kader informed me that he reaped home a harvest of 20 maunds/bigha of paddy from producing BR-28. He and his wife made full use of the training on good quality seed. In the absence of such training, that is, when they towed the traditional path of preservation of seeds, the yield was 17 maunds/bigha. In the aman season, he produced BR-11 to take home 16 maunds/bigha against 12 maunds/bigha in the days driven by devastations all around. In those days, Kader and his wife used to keep seeds in a sack only to see that seeds were spoiled due to air contamination. On many occasions, their seed beds were damaged

before that, Tk.1400 and before that Tk.1200. The seedlings are bought not only by neighbours when they fail to grow but also by villagers from far and wide.

### Deficit to surplus

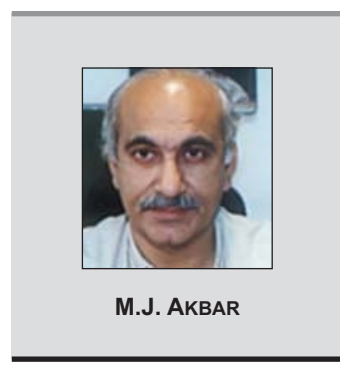
However, in the last boro season, he got 80 maunds from four bighas and after surrendering half of the output, brought back home 40 maunds of paddy. There is also increased yield from BR-11 and together they got 86 maunds of paddy in one year. After meeting household needs, this tenant family emerges as a surplus rice producer. A part of the excess is sent to the market to buy saree for Fatema or to pay tuition fees for the daughter. Fatema, choked with emotions, narrated to me that she could not provide education to her son due to poverty and never ever she could wear two sarees. "I was a maid in some body's house just three to four years back. Managing food for the family forced me to be a maid and my husband a 'munji' (year-long labour in a household). Food shortage stays away these days due to the hard work we put in

Second, "Now, if we, we can eat fish twice a week, earlier no way despite want desire".

Third, "In the past, there was scarcity of rented land as crops failed and we the poor could hardly bear the costs of raising output. Now seeing the yield rate from good quality seeds, owners are running after us and asking us to till their land. We are asking whether to rent in more or not".

The participants in our discussions, mostly poor, told me that the increased yield and the food security that resulted reduced, to an extent, their dependence even on NGO. According to them, as of now they can save at least Tk.300 per bigha from the economic use of seeds, seedlings and very little use of insecticides. This has been supported by judicious use of fertilizers. And all of these developments came from the training on seed health. The cash cost needed to cultivate one bigha with BR-28 comes close to Tk.300 implying that there is no need of searching for credit sources.

## 145 or 250?



M.J. AKBAR

TWENTY years ago this week the most powerful Sikh in India was Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Giani Zail Singh was the President of India but he was merely in a Delhi palace; Bhindranwale, seated on the roof of Langar Sri Guru Ram Das Sahib in the winter sun, or in the shade when it got warmer, with a durbar of devotees and flitting journalists, had the country on an edge. I remember vividly the taunt in his eyes when he laughed and told me in February 1984 that if the Prime Minister of India wanted to talk to him she could come to the Golden Temple. His guns had shaken the confidence of India, and journalists spoke helplessly of the Vietnam syndrome: if it was a dull day you could always count on a few corpses from Punjab to make the lead story. From London Dr Jagjit Singh Chauhan, the self-styled 'President of Khalistan' co-ordinated with Bhindranwale about when to announce a provisional government of Khalistan that would nominate a Sikh Parliament and collect taxes, while Chauhan would open a Khalistan House in London to work for international recognition of this state.

On 1 June there was formal hostility between Bhindranwale's armed men, firing from the roofs of the buildings in the Temple complex and the police outside: 11 died. On the evening of 2 June Mrs Indira Gandhi addressed the nation on Punjab. Her speech was preceded by Iqbal's Saare jahan se achha,

Hindustan hamara and the Saraswati Vandana. Even while she was speaking two infantry divisions from Meerut and Secunderabad moved into Amritsar. The next morning Lieutenant General Ranjit Singh Dayal, a Sikh and decorated war hero of 1965 and 1971, was made an adviser (security) to the governor of Punjab, B.D. Pande. On the night of 3 June a 36-hour curfew was imposed around the Golden Temple. On the morning of 4 June at 4.45 the battle to end the

there is no reason why the government should not last five years. If the NDA could get along for more than five years with only an occasional flash of silliness from the likes of Mamata Banerjee, then there is no reason why Dr Manmohan Singh cannot take what he wants with a reasonable amount of give.

Given the colour that they bring to the environment, and the attendant media projection, it is perfectly understandable that we tend to confuse politics with politicians. But

his views to himself, but delight was not his first emotion on Saturday. The allies have a point when they claim they propped up the Congress, for this election was a victory and defeat for partnerships.

The most significant statistic is that both the BJP and the Congress lost two per cent of their vote share: one alliance worked and the other did not. Check out another fact: apart from Delhi-Haryana, and to an extent Gujarat and the Northeast, the Congress was decimated where

difficult battle to spike the demand for Gorkhaland. The Congress itself will worry about the impact such a decision would have on Vidarbha and the rest of Maharashtra, where Assembly elections are due in a few months.

Ironically, issues of governance never break up such a government. Politics does.

Mrs Sonia Gandhi made an important statement when she told the Congress Parliamentary Party that she did not consider 145 seats

the BJP by a second general election on the same terms, except that the Congress will try and increase its presence in the states where it does not have allies, or at least a significant one: the 180-odd seats of Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and UP. But to do so you must cash in early, before the sheen has rubbed off. The BJP won handsomely in MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh only because it did not wait for too long after its Assembly victories. In power, sheen disappears very quickly.

The rational thing to do of course will be to let Dr Manmohan Singh run a good government for its normal term. But that would leave the Congress static at 145 seats, with every chance of a large chunk of this disappearing in 2009. That does not seem very helpful, does it? For the Congress to gain any further ground, an election within a year is the only real option.

Would the allies be ready for another general election? The allies gain nothing by haste. There are too many imponderables, the most crucial being the Assembly elections that are due in states like Maharashtra, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. Power in the states is vital for the allies. Laloo Yadav may swallow a bit and accept what he gets in Delhi, but he is going to dictate terms in Bihar. So does the Congress remain content with its marginal role in Bihar? And if it wants more how much more? The interplay of such tensions will be a continuing headache.

Well, at least there is going to be more than one head to share that ache. Manmohan Singh is in office, but Sonia Gandhi is in power.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

## BYLINE

**Mrs Sonia Gandhi made an important statement when she told the Congress Parliamentary Party that she did not consider 145 seats to be a mandate; she added that she would consider 250 seats a mandate. This is a legitimate ambition for a national party, and Mrs Gandhi had every right to tell her MPs that they should trust her to take the party to that level... But that leaves the allies with an uncomfortable question: when does Mrs Sonia Gandhi want those 250 seats?**

Bhindranwale threat to India began; it was only on the morning of 7 June that he died. The heavy price that Mrs Gandhi herself paid, in martyrdom, is too well known to bear repetition.

Who could have predicted in May 1984 that in May 2004 a Sikh would be sworn in as India's Prime Minister? Could there be a more marvelous tribute to India, to Indian democracy and to the Indian people, the bedrock of both the nation and its leadership?

The most important aspect of this decision is that it has been made without any fuss. Mrs Sonia Gandhi chose to make Dr Manmohan Singh Prime Minister not because he was a Sikh, or from this caste or that, but simply because he was the best person for the job. It is an interesting fact that while electoral politics has been prey to caste and community considerations, the Prime Minister's office has remained above such zero-sum games.

So to the obvious question: how uneasy will this head be? In theory,

however temperamental they may be, it is not politicians who will be Dr Singh's problem but the larger play of politics. The allies will reconcile themselves to whatever they get because it would be suicide to rock a Manmohan Singh government even before it has been sworn in. One of the great strengths of this government is going to be Dr Singh himself, since his integrity (not just financial but also political) is considered to be beyond reproach. The fact that he is not, and has never been, a politician could be his best asset.

The great liability he inherits is that this alliance was born out of compulsion rather than an allotment of shared space. Nothing was discussed, and much was assumed. The Congress did not inform Laloo Yadav before the elections that he could not become home minister, for instance. He has been a bit stunned to discover that he is being treated on par with Nitish Kumar. Ram Vilas Paswan had obvious problems with the portfolio assigned to him. Sharad Pawar kept

ever it contested alone. The list of such states is a long one: Kerala, Karnataka, Orissa, Bengal, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Punjab. If anyone is doing any thinking amidst the euphoria of power, this should go into the category of sobering thoughts.

A single, passionate desire to defeat the BJP brought the allies together, but such glue is vulnerable to conflicting agendas. An obvious concern is the demand for a separate Telangana by one of the constituents of the alliance, Telangana Rashtra Samiti. Without the TRS the Congress could never have pulled off such a decisive victory in Andhra. But while UP, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh were divided by the mutual consent of all parties, there is no such consensus on Telangana. Chandrababu Naidu has fought an election against the division of Andhra Pradesh, and he could seek reindirection on the streets. The CPI(M) will be wary of concessions in Telangana, since it fought a

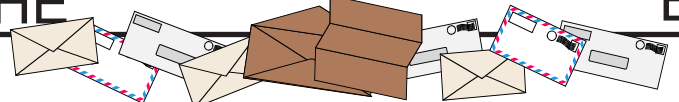
to be a mandate; she added that she would consider 250 seats a mandate. This is a legitimate ambition for a national party, and Mrs Gandhi had every right to tell her MPs that they should trust her to take the party to that level.

But that leaves the allies with an uncomfortable question: when does Mrs Sonia Gandhi want those 250 seats? Is she willing to wait till the general elections of 2009?

This is the question that will control the politics of the alliance, because most of the partners in Delhi are competitors in the states. This is why the Marxists kept out of government. If the Congress wants to grow in Bihar, then it can only do so by displacing Laloo Yadav's party, because Laloo has absorbed the space that once belonged to the Congress. The situation is absolutely the same in Maharashtra.

Alternatively, the Congress might offer its allies the option of a second strategy: let us cash in on the rising popularity of Mrs Sonia Gandhi and the depression within

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Are they doctors?

It happened eight months ago, I was suddenly sick with high fever. And immediately I consulted a doctor who was an American MD. He prescribed me anti-biotic along with fever reducing tablets, having suspected a viral fever after seeing the symptoms. The medicines provided temporary remission, but when the course was over the fever returned with greater intensity. My parents talked to the doctor again and he increased the dosages. But my condition remained unchanged and then got worse. Seeing no way, my parents took me to another specialist doctor. This man doubted that it was a case of malaria but this time, in order to confirm it, he asked me to go to a specific diagnostic centre for thorough pathological

tests. Meanwhile, he prescribed a course of medicines for treatment of malaria until the reports came.

As my illness became a menace to my parents, they did not dare to give me the new medicine and decided to wait for the results. When the reports came, there was only urine infection found in the examinations. Seeing the report the doctor felt ashamed and asked me not to take the pills that he had prescribed earlier. Then he gave the name of a medicine for treating the infection.

But nothing worked out eventually. And my condition took such a bad turn that I was taken to a hospital under the treatment of another specialist doctor. Seeing the previous records and the nature of the illness, this man thought that I had an attack of typhoid and said that medicines won't have any effect on me and I

would have to take injections. He too advised to do the same tests as done before. Without waiting for the report, I was given injections. Thanks to the Almighty, my third doctor's 'prediction' was right.

The purpose behind narrating my experience is to show the state of medicare in our country. All my doctors, including the last one, have a brilliant academic career, with a lot of higher degrees from abroad. But I think they only acquired degrees for the sake of degrees and glossy academic awards. They are not good as doctors. For this, many people are going through the ordeal that I have undergone. I survived but everybody may not be that lucky!

**Rubab Abdullah  
Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka  
Hunch of voters**

It is a light at the end of the tunnel for further trips coming decades during this new millennium. Millions of voters are waiting impatiently to get out of the tunnel into the fresh air of liberated local politics.

The voters, however marginalised, can apply collective wisdom to counter the oily politicians. Vajpayee's image of the shiny urban India did not sell in the rural areas, where the majority of the voters live (analysts in the media).

The rich were growing richer, and the right interfaces were inadequate for narrowing the communication gaps between the urban and rural dwellers. Service-oriented politics is yet to be established in the developing countries. The world's largest democratic nation got a footing in the right direction. How? You cannot buy off 600 million voters the legis-

tics is too complicated!

The patience shown by Sonia Gandhi is admirable, and that too in her adopted country. She had no competitor in the Indian political culture (she was written off!). She comes with a fresh outlook, and this is the time to prove herself during the coming years of the new regime. The global political flux might act as dampers to steer towards a course of the golden mean.

The Mughals could rule vast India for about five centuries. The British Raj did not last that long. Kashmir became an artificial political issue for half a century (two generations). The potentially powerful Saarc region could not take off in decades, thanks to political micro-wisdom and cataract vision.

It is time to reveal the inner self of political wisdom. The near

future should always look brighter than the smartest contemporary leadership, because the future would become the present in due course, and the leaders would be merely historical names after a short sojourn.

India's relationship with her neighbours is not worth raving about. The big brother image was negatively exploited, raising the defence budgets in two countries decade after decade. Small and cramped Bangladesh, with the highest density of population in the world, finds herself outmaneuvered time and again with the best of intentions on both sides! Politics is out of control, due to poor leads by the leaders. Self-centred leadership is the bane of the region. Changes now seem to be appear-

ing in the mindset of the politicians in the region, with the recent (unwelcome?) attention being paid to Saarc by the Western powers. This outside interest seems to be acting as a flux to move out of the rigidity in traditional approach to political overtures. Bilateralism does not work in the region, as these developing nations work under many handicaps, theoretically and practically. The members must unite as in the EU.

**Abu Abd  
Dhaka**

### Attention: BT

I want to draw the attention of the authorities concerned to the timing of azan broadcast by BTV on 17 May. The time of maghrib azan

was 6.37 approximately. We know the timing of maghrib azan depends on the sunset and the *wakt* for maghrib prayer is very short and, therefore, the *jamat* takes place soon after the azan is given unlike the *zohr*, *asr* and *esha* prayers where the *wakt* has longer time span to pray after azan. As we know, one should pray as soon as the azan is given. But on 17 May BTV telecast the azan at 6:55pm, which was very very late for maghrib azan.

That must have created problems for the devotees who rely on BTV azan.

**KI Ahmed  
Banani, Dhaka**