

## Lawyers' probe

### Its recommendations are worthy of note

A high-profile lawyers' investigation into the August 21 grenade attack on Awami League rally has yielded some very important findings about the incident. While one may take issue with the factual basis and authenticity of its findings, very few would disagree with its recommendations.

In the first place, the government ought to register the fact that, the formation of a private probe body, in this instance by some very eminent lawyers of the country, to investigate into the grenade blast of 21 August is a manifestation of the people's frustration at the failure of the administration in getting to the bottom of any of the more than a dozen incidents of bomb blast in the country in the last decade or so. Frustrations compound even more when the public are left mute observers and helpless victims of these acts that have occurred with disturbing regularity and continue to be perpetrated with boundless impunity.

Admittedly, the lawyers were plagued by certain shortcomings in their effort, not least of all by the fact that they are by profession lawyers and not criminal investigators *per se*. Thus, their findings may suffer from an inherent lack of adroitness, and that their ability in this regard would be seriously limited is no surprise. Therefore, we do not consider the probe's findings as conclusive or definitive nor have the lawyers themselves claimed as such. However, we are in full accord with the recommendations made by the committee.

Their demand that the findings of all the government investigation committees, including the one concerning 21 August attack on the Awami League rally, be made public, bears convincing rationale. Much of the public frustration stems from the opacity of information, and in most cases, no information at all, resulting in all kinds of speculations, assumptions and hypothesisations. One fails to understand the government's seemingly pathological resistance to the idea of sharing information with the public whose safety and security it is for the government to protect.

We find it rather ludicrous that while the public is denied information on these incidents by the government, startling information can be had from investigative reports published elsewhere such as the Jane's Intelligence Review Report on Chittagong arms haul which we carried in our front page yesterday.

The recommendations of the lawyers probe body are worthy of note and we suggest that the government consider these without any prejudice.

## LGRD ministry funds allocation

### Let us keep politics out of development

OPPOSITION and government law-makers in the parliamentary standing committee on the LGRD ministry have been trading accusations and counter-accusations back and forth, over alleged discrimination in allocation of development funds. Opposition law-makers have requested a report showing how funds had been allocated by the ministry over the past three years while the ruling party members pressed for a report covering the AL rule as well. The standing committee on the LGRD ministry responded to the situation by proposing a report encompassing the last eight years to include the record of the AL administration as well.

We are not interested in the political posturing and one-upmanship that is taking place among the committee members. This is not a question of political point scoring. The fact of the matter is that development funds have been politicised before and that the same is still happening now. The point is to move beyond partisan name-calling and to ensure that development funds are allocated on the basis of necessity and parity.

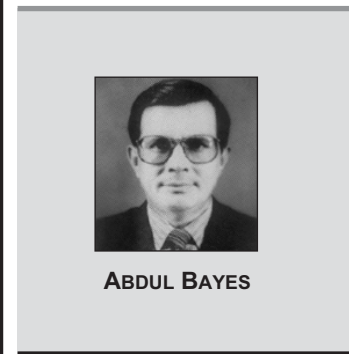
If there is one thing that the government and the opposition should be able to agree on it is that funding for development should not be politicised. The only considerations should be economic ones and not which way the constituency voted in the last election or who happens to be the member of parliament.

The political atmosphere in the country is too polarised as it is. We have long pleaded in these pages for a rapprochement between the major parties and some kind of consensus when it comes to managing the affairs of state. The country has suffered incalculable economic and non-economic damage due to the inability of the government and the opposition to compromise and work together.

The last thing we need is for this feud to be carried on into the sphere of development such that those who bear the greatest burden are the poorest and most vulnerable members of society -- those who depend on government development funding for the uplift of their region.

Ordinary people and specially those who are most in need of government assistance should not have to pay the price of the petty political in-fighting.

# Gas and grievous game



DESPITE the recent resentments prevailing in citizens' minds following the failures in gas supply situations, I pick up the pen to write about the gas-poverty nexus. I am not, for that matter, oblivious of the fact that the energy sector in general and the gas sector in particular has long been reeling under the grievous governance. Gas is the dominant natural resource in Bangladesh and every citizen -- poor or rich -- should have access to it. However, most of our perceptions, policies, priorities, and practices pertaining to the energy sector have allegedly been pro-rich and pro-urban. Allow me to demonstrate the "discomforts" with a few examples.

The scarce natural resource is not being distributed equitably throughout the country. For example, a double burner gas in urban areas costs five times less than equivalent energy from LPG and four times less than the alternative kerosene fuel. This means that a poor household in Ashugonj with access to piped gas is richer than a poor household, say, in the western part of the country where gas is yet to go. Or, a rich household in the western part is poorer

than a rich household from Ashugonj. Only 6 per cent of the households are connected with gas and most of them reside in urban areas. The subsidy on domestic consumption amounts to something like Tk. 22 billion per year or 74 per cent assuming kerosene as the alternative fuel and 79 per cent assuming LPG as the alternative fuel. This means that the urban rich are seizing upon the subsidy, and

north-western part of the country. The idea sounds sensible in the wake of the feeling of a "not so big domestic market" for piped gas. Initially, the euphoria of exports prevailed and the donors decidedly stood in favour of exports and utilization of the earned foreign exchange for furthering economic causes of the country. However, enthusiasm soon dissipated, paving ways for a practical outlook on the sector. Therefore the ongoing

could also be noticed that about 70 per cent of the household income in the former originate from non-agricultural pursuits compared to roughly 55 per cent the control areas. With access to gas, the cost of cooking comes down by 25 per cent or so. There could be in evidence growth of markets, banks, and NGOs, and increasing economic transactions in the former than in the latter. The irrigation cost is 30 per cent lower in target areas

as gas bill. About the connection cost of say Tk.10,000, one-third of them agreed to pay instantly from their own or borrowed sources, but the rest requested for arrangements of payments through installments.

By and large, it seems that there is a willingness to pay for gas supply, even by the poor. Our econometric analysis shows that access to electricity affects poor households' income and the effect is highly statistically significant.

**BENEATH THE SURFACE**

**My personal calculations tend to say that gas alone contributes to one-tenth of the GDP directly, and more so, indirectly. We should also develop gas-related institutions in such a fashion where there will be less wastage, less trade unionism, and more punishment for offences. Raising prices is a necessary but not sufficient condition for feeding a fragile plant or enterprise. Economics is all about reducing the cost of production.**

inequality increases among the different segments of the society. Only 12 per cent of the households from the bottom fifth of income distribution and 21 per cent of the second lowest quintile have access to electricity. Most of the households of the top quintile have access to electricity. That means access of the poor to electricity is very poor in a regime of poor national access to electricity (30 per cent, on average). Total energy use by the poor in the east costs Tk.500 per month, which is 65 per cent lower than that in west. Energy prices are higher in areas with high incidence of poverty.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Petrobangla are jointly holding a workshop in the city on the issue of transmission of gas to the

workshop could be termed as timely and tuned to the domestic demand side of the gas supply. However, as the transmission would involve huge sums of investment, quite obviously, a serious brain-storming session should be in order with a view to capture the socio-economic ramifications of the transmission and distribution of gas to that part of the country.

I am concerned with the gas-poverty nexus. Would gas supply help the poor -- accounting for roughly 60 per cent of the households -- of that region? To this effect, I would like to draw upon some empirical evidence.

We have observed that per capita income of households with gas and electricity is roughly 30 per cent higher than those without these facilities, that is, in control areas. It

than in control areas. People perceive that due to gas and electricity, good teachers are available in the locality and there is seemingly a reverse migration. Women and children in control areas spend, on average, 3-5 hours a month in fuel collection that apparently reaches zero with gas access. The children in target areas study for more hours at night than those in control areas, and importantly, people in target areas are found to be more informative about market conditions than the control ones.

In both target and control areas, access to gas is perceived to be an important input to the improvement of livelihoods. Eighty per cent of the poor (having a poverty level income of Tk.6000 per month) desire access to piped gas. They are willing to pay Tk.400-450 per month

Access to gas also affects their income but at 10 per cent level of significance. One would then conclude that access to electricity and gas is the prime mover of the poor's pie. The government should take that into cognizance and come up with such pro-poor projects.

Leaving aside the poor, access to gas and electricity could contribute to further development of the region. Just remember the contribution of the Bangabandhu Bridge over Jamuna. The bridge seemingly bridged the socio-economic gap between the regions. The supply of gas and electricity along with it could help product and factor mobility across regions at an increasing rate, equalize prices, and contribute to balanced regional development. The intents expressed by the Tata group of industries to set up gas-

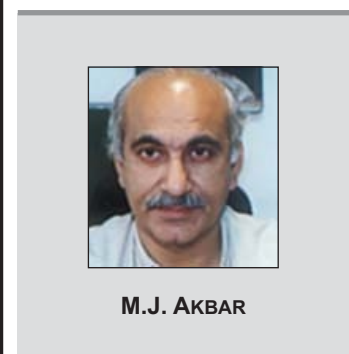
based industries in that part of the country only goes to emphasize the point.

It is not merely the issue of demand and supply. We need to revisit our perceptions about the whole gas sector, especially gas economics. Natural resource economics generally does not follow the micro and macro economic principles and our universities should teach a subject like gas economics. Intuitively speaking, gas has a greater contribution to GDP than generally perceived. What about CNG transport, fertilizer factories, and power plants? My personal calculations tend to say that gas alone contributes to one-tenth of the GDP directly, and more so, indirectly. We should also develop gas-related institutions in such a fashion where there will be less wastage, less trade unionism, and more punishment for offences. Raising prices is a necessary but not sufficient condition for feeding a fragile plant or enterprise. Economics is all about reducing the cost of production. One has to think about reduction in costs. I suggest a value chain analysis on the cost components of the gas-related business.

Once the north-western part of the country is provided access to gas and electricity, I strongly suspect that the poverty-stricken areas would benefit immensely and the country would reach its Millennium Development Goals of poverty reduction.

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# Effect and cause



ONE of the most familiar words in the English language is "because" -- because events are generally ruled by the relationship between cause and effect. If there is a cause there must be an effect. This makes issues, trivial and important, understandable. Examples from mass culture will prove the point. Why do music channels keep showing Adnan Sami songs endlessly? Because that is a reasonably popular way to spend seven minutes of television time without paying a rupee. Why are new songs shifting to Punjabi-soul after years of only Bhangra-pop? They are herding into the Bulle Shah train driven by Rabbi Shergill. Why do murderers get trapped by brilliant detectives in crime thrillers? Because they have a motive. Why does the bikini issue of the American magazine Sports Illustrated (its heavily illustrated with a different kind of sport) get thicker each year (224 pages, according to the copy on my table)? Because, despite an inflated price, it sells out faster than bikinis. Why should the editor of this page get tempted to use one of those pictures from the bikini issue as an illustration for this column? Because that damn picture would get an ogle even out of an Edit or Op-Ed page. So why doesn't that illustration get used?

Because there are strict orders on the limits to which an Edit-page culture can go. You get the idea of cause-and-effect. The effect may be obvious but it is the cause that is the real story.

In mass politics, strangely, the sequence so often gets reversed. It is not the cause, but the effect that is the real story. Effect often reshapes and fundamentally alters the starting point. Clearly, this

was on expected lines. In all fairness, the cracks in the Delhi-centric UPA were not unexpected. The logic that keeps partners together in Delhi does not extend to Patna.

If Delhi is the head, and therefore heady, then Patna is the base, and therefore basic. Ram Vilas Paswan cannot sustain his party by telling his followers that the doors of expansion are shut. Neither can

kept the Congress by his side. There was no way in which he could have retained the support of Ram Vilas, since the bitterness between the two is personal. But, in broad terms, when it comes to an analysis of causes, everyone has a story to tell.

No one, including Lalu, knows what the results will be, but the body language of the Lalu camp is edgy. Lalu Yadav himself does not

vested interest in the status quo. If the dice throws up different numbers, and Ram Vilas, with 25-odd MLAs, can persuade the JD(U) to join his government, rope in independents and get non-participatory support of the BJP then the cracks at the base will turn heads in Delhi.

One nuance has already been established. Alliance in Delhi is no guarantee for a similar equation in the states. In Jharkhand, the Con-

**BYLINE**

**If Rabri Devi remains chief minister, Lalu Yadav will have a vested interest in the status quo. If the dice throws up different numbers, and Ram Vilas, with 25-odd MLAs, can persuade the JD(U) to join his government, rope in independents and get non-participatory support of the BJP then the cracks at the base will turn heads in Delhi.**

proposition needs some explanation. This column is being written on the eve of the declaration of results of the Bihar and Jharkhand Assembly elections, hardly the best moment to pontificate on a dicey subject. Elections are also taking place in Haryana, but since the results in this state seem to be a foregone conclusion, we will leave them alone.

What is the situation in Bihar, where Lalu Prasad Yadav has been in power for 15 years? We can leave the scientific business of getting the results wrong to the opinion pollsters. Let us stick to the indisputable. The fact is that every political force, barring a section of the Left, has done everything in its power to defeat Lalu. I say a section of the Left because the most important Leftist group in Bihar are the Naxalites, and they were as determined to end Lalu-Raj as anyone else. The Janata Dal (United) and the BJP were natural opponents, so their mobilisation

the Congress. And in Lalu Yadav's scheme of things, both Ram Vilas and the Congress were marginal factors, necessary to ensure his victory, but unnecessary in the exercise of power. It was an ideal situation for him, and precisely for that reason could not be sustained. This was a primary cause for the scatter of the Delhi alliance in Bihar. An equally important cause was that every political party overestimates its strength on the eve of an election. After all, elections are a human business. There cannot be precise markers. It is a fluid sum game. It is only in retrospect that the mind clears up. The BJP is still wondering (privately of course) what the tallies might have been if it had given the AGP an extra seat in Assam, Shibu Soren an extra seat in Jharkhand, and stayed with Om Prakash Chautala in Haryana rather than spurning him. If Lalu had felt that the arc of public opinion would steadily move away from him, he might have offered the fifteen extra seats that would have

believe in body language. He believes in language. Whether in victory or defeat Lalu Yadav is irrepressible. He has been using a few epithets about senior Congress leaders (apart from Sonia Gandhi) that will never be quoted in their authorised biographies.

There is only one realistic measurement of effect: when topsy and turvy have finished their game, who is in power? No one is getting a majority from the people; power will go to those who can cobble one in the Assembly. Lalu's problem is that power has only one meaning for him: his wife becomes chief minister again. An ally as chief minister could be as problematic as an opponent in that chair, and a nominee from his own party perhaps the worst of all options. This is a peculiarity of all personality-driven parties. In Lalu's case there is an added dimension of vengeance. He cannot afford to be out of power.

If Rabri Devi remains chief minister, Lalu Yadav will have a

gress and Shibu Soren's JMM first nudged the third partner, Lalu Yadav, out, and then set about poaching from each other. The aim was not merely to defeat the BJP-JD(U) but also to become the dominant partner of the alliance. This is also acknowledgement of the individual power of a chief minister. That single office outweighs the collective power of a bunch of ministers. This is partly because of the nature of the office, and partly because a chief minister, unlike a Prime Minister, does not have heavyweights as colleagues. This was why the Congress demanded, and got, this chair in Maharashtra, although Sharad Pawar had the larger number of MLAs. The rules were changed because the Congress could use its Delhi muscle.

The Delhi muscle did not work in Chennai. DMK chief M. Karunanidhi took pre-emptive action when E.V.K.S. Elangovan, the Congress Union minister, dared to dream of his party's return

to partial power in Tamil Nadu. The DMK was ready to go as far as to withdraw its ministers from the Central government. It was only a minor coincidence that Karunanidhi called for a meeting of his party on this for Sunday the 27th. This is the Sunday on which the results of Bihar, Jharkhand and Haryana will be announced. The difference between Karunanidhi and Sharad Pawar is but this: the DMK's departure from the UPA rattles the coalition; Pawar's departure raises a sigh, but nothing more.

Point of order: Guess who was beside Lalu Yadav in Central Hall, enjoying the wit in his customarily restrained fashion, while Lalu rewrote the profiles of senior Congress leaders? Sharad Pawar. This by itself means nothing. Power has very little to do with friendship and absolutely nothing to do with banter. Self-interest is the primary motive; and a brother's interest is protected a long way later, if at all.

Point to note: If Lalu Yadav defeats his opponents and his friends, not to mention pollsters, crosses the 100-seat mark, reduces the Congress to 15-odd seats, emerges as the largest single party/group and dictates the shape of the next government, then what? That too will have its consequences in Delhi, because he will demand a larger share of power in Delhi. Could he extend his grasp to Ram Vilas Paswan's portfolio? Logic suggests that he could. There has been no reshuffle of the Manmohan Singh government since it was sworn in, and these results could set the scene for a fresh check on equation.

When effect impacts on cause, there is but naturally an after-effect.

MJ Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

# 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.

### How objective is our media?

I'm not sure what to make of the so called notion of 'objective' journalism. On one hand, a newspaper suggested that Dr. Galib received part of his funding from Kuwait. On the other hand, another daily hinted at some kind of "Indian" involvement with MJMB, JMB, and Dr. Galib. Certainly both can't be true (barring the conspiracy-theorists we may come across occasionally). I noticed a similar difference in the news reports in the aftermath of the brutal killing of SAMS Kibria (my apologies for not keeping track of the particular edition I have in mind).

Media bias is not entirely unexpected, but the extent to which these reports differ from one another is mind boggling. Our nation has been going through a turbulent period that has left our pride and image dented and distorted to our donors and allies alike. We certainly don't need our journalists to rub salt to our wounds.

Our journalists are probably better off adhering to "reporting" rather than "interpreting" or unduly speculating on these events until we have further evidence. It should be common knowledge that most readers prefer fact-based news even if it's pithy and/or uninteresting over more colourful news lacking in true substance.

**Hasan Faruq US**

### UN concern

According to a news story in The Daily Star dated 22 February 2005, the United Nations (UN) has expressed its concern over the increasing deterioration of the law and order situation in Bangladesh. The agency has announced a security alarm called 'Security Phase-1,' which means the UN staff members seeking to visit Bangladesh have to inform the Designated Officer for the UN Security (here, the UN Resident Coordinator/UNDP Representative) and have to have prior 'clearance' to enter into the country. The decision was taken at a meeting of the heads of all UN agencies in Bangladesh on 20 February last and effected from the same day. Earlier, there was no security phase for all of the country except the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the district of Cox's Bazar. The Security Phase- 2 was imposed in Cox's Bazar from 28 October 2004 while the CHT was under Security Phase-1.

The decision was taken in the wake of a number of bomb attacks across the country, including on the offices of some NGOs like BRAC, and Grameen Bank, as the report credited to the BDNews said quoting an UN official here.

### Leaders

The political, economic, social and religious leaders of our country should give the citizens peace, security and stability, and in return the countrymen would reward our nation with rapid economic growth and higher National Income (NI).

**Golam Ashraf DOHS Baridhara, Dhaka**

### Our expectations

Living far away from the country we look forward to hearing good news about our beloved country liberated 33 years ago by the people of the country, for which they had to suffer a lot. The people, unlike many bigwigs, never claimed any credit.

In these 33 years we have heard only claims and counter claims of the people most of whom did not lose much or rather anything; consequently, we failed to achieve the desired progress of the country.

Now it is the demand of the time to forget the past and work together to build the country for the sake of the downtrodden. It is not the time for haltal, destroying state/public properties, threatening with trump card, wasting time and energy building mausoleums, when most of the people in the country are literally illiterate, not

adequately fed and clad in relation to countries which got liberated at or around the same time.

It is unfortunate that there are so many political parties but with such a meagre number of real leaders of character. Indeed, we are unlucky.

Bombs are hurled, investigations are made, but why no publishing of reports? How can there be authorities challenging the country's Law and Order Authority?

Before we blame anyone, any party, any foreign country we must try sincerely to find out the truth jointly as this is our country this does not belong to certain families but to people of this land in its entirety. Why should we have to invite foreigners to investigate the crimes committed here? Don't we have any self respect?

**AB On e-mail**

### Islamic militants

The government is indeed forced to eat its own words as far as the Islamic militants are concerned. It has long been telling us that they did not exist at all. But 'not crying foul' did not work as the militants have begun to implement their nefarious designs. The only good news is that people of Bangladesh will never accept their fanatic ideas.

So people are behind all progress movements.

The government should crack-down on the trouble makers, and people will welcome it.

Remember the militants will gain strength if they are allowed to operate freely. So the government must act before it is too late. The situation can still be controlled with effective measures.

**A citizen Dhaka**