

The lights are going out

FARID BAKHT

SHOPPERS were relieved to see that the lights in their favourite shopping centres still shone brightly, the day after the authorities came up with their latest clever idea. However, shopkeepers are under pressure to cut back on the air-conditioning and lighting so that that critical commodity, electricity, can be supplied elsewhere.

One might wonder how long it is before the lights go out on a system where basic services are failing regularly. Appearances are being kept up for the diplomatic enclaves. Not until the last moment do they have to suffer the sound of diesel generators kicking in instantaneously whenever the local electricity "supplier" decides their time is up. But they are not so easily fooled. They read the papers. To underscore the permanence of failure, words such as "load-shedding" have become part of the daily language. Type it in your PC, and your friendly software will underline it, assuming you have made a spelling mistake. But the citizens of this metropolis know what it means: misery, mosquitoes, heat, lack of water and frustration.

Is it that difficult? You might even wonder how is that we have a shortage of electricity? Despite all the controversy about how much gas we have or do not have, no one doubts we have sufficient to produce a puny 4,000 MW of electricity. In fact, we need only 1,000 MW extra to meet our shortfall, for now.

Why has there been next to no, or at best negligible, addition to our power-generating capacity over the last few years? A favourite reason for cancelling projects is because they are financed by

suppliers' credit. Has anyone compared the loss to economic growth of power shortages against the cost of repaying the loans?

Beyond aid, we could choose to import micro-generators of 1MW to mega-sized 100MW turbines ourselves. Why don't we? Is it because we lack imagination?

Insoluble? The big foreign electricity producers naturally require foreign currency in payment. They are not going to be fobbed off with a currency that is following the US dollar in a descent

How does it work? Titas Gas pipes in the gas, the generator converts that into electricity, which then gets fed into the grid. Each plant only requires a handful of engineers and we have enough of them. Decentralised power generation is a real alternative and we have the most important inputs to the process in place, namely gas and trained people. We could have a score of such establishments dotted around the capital (or better, industrial zones). They could be in place in months if we

demand. Sensibly done, this is termed "Demand-Side Management". Unfortunately, the authorities think this means punishing consumers by denying electricity for hours on end. We know that if only compact fluorescent lamps (CFL) were used widely, we could shave 300MW off the demand in Dhaka alone! Many electricity suppliers throughout the world have found it cheaper to dish out CFL bulbs for free, rather than build new power stations.

Why can DESA/DESCO not destroy the old inefficient bulbs and replace them free of charge with equivalent CFL bulbs? Start with the government offices, to set an example. Then mobilise a few thousand special distributors and go to houses, factories, offices and shopping centres. Or set up an exchange scheme in several centres. Financially, it would make sense to the bottom-line of both consumer and producer. On top, slab punitive import duties on old-style fridges and electrical equipment, while simultaneously making it duty-free to import the latest energy-conserving models of fridges, TVs, ACs etc. Some agents will protest, but retailers and consumers will benefit.

We could moan about theft or "systems loss". The good news is that some honest officials have run pilot projects and dramatically reduced systems loss in three districts, within the present set-up. The bad news is that this good work was not copied nationally. We now need a few democratically elected people to stand up and make some tough decisions and stop making excuses.

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with no end. We have barely three months worth of the stuff for imports. So that's a non-starter. We can't pay. Have we asked why we need those companies at all? Enron has come and gone. AES went belly up too. The rest look anaemic.

Many people are unaware that Bangladeshi companies can set up as energy providers using off-the-shelf foreign technology and produce electricity. The government has a policy in place. The Rural Electricity Board (REB) buys electricity at competitive prices in local currency (Taka) from small 10MW generator companies. The technology (generators) is imported and is robust.

had the will. We don't.

Tender-bajis : Private and public entities have numerous proposals in place but the Byzantine labyrinth that describes the "Tender Process" means that decisions do not get made. The tenders initiated in previous regime are discarded. New unsolicited proposals are approved and then discontinued. People are busy shuffling paper, positioning for a percentage. Keep an eye out for a sudden flurry of approvals over the next twelve months, which then stand a great chance of being cancelled in the future.

We demand some management: The authorities do not seem in a rush to increase supply and would rather play around with

LEST WE FORGET

Justice Murshed

An achiever and a Good Samaritan

PROF MD AFSARUDDIN

TODAY is the 26th anniversary of death of Justice Sayed Mahbub Murshed. My first meeting with him took place in the very early 1960's. I was, at that time, in the absence of the late Professor A K Najmul Karim, the head of the Department of Sociology at Dhaka University. Justice Murshed was then residing in the impressive red house opposite the British Council.

I have had the privilege to know several distinguished men in my lifetime. Few men, however, have made such an indelible impression upon me, as had Justice Murshed during our twenty years acquaintance. I look upon him as one of my most highly revered mentors and as one who will never cease to be a source of inspiration to me -- as a champion of justice, righteousness and all that is dear to me.

Justice Murshed was born in the second decade of the last century and a fair assessment of his merits has to be made in the light of the times he was born in. During that particular era in our history the Muslim community in Bengal lagged behind the Hindu community in various aspects. In particular the dearth of Muslims established in diverse intellectual fields was acute. Justice Murshed was born at that time into a distinguished Muslim family of Murshidabad on 11 January 1911.

His father late Syed Abdus Salik was a member of the Bengal Civil Service and his mother late Afzalunnessa Khatun was a sister

of Sher-e-Bangla A K Fazlul Huq. His other illustrious ancestors include Khalid-bin-Walid, the great commander of the early armies of Islam.

In the academic field he won his first accolade in 1926 when he matriculated first among all candidates in the Rajshahi division under the Calcutta University. He graduated with honours in Economics in 1930 from the Calcutta University. Subsequently he obtained two MA's -- in Economics and in Persian. While studying for the bar in England during the 1930's, he obtained the first position in the Part I examination. He was and still is among the very few subcontinental Muslims who passed the bar final examination with honours.

In the legal field he was outstanding both as a barrister and later as a judge. He was never constrained by the letter of the law. His interpretation of the law was always for the greater good of society at large. He felt that the law was created to serve man and not conversely. In other words, the purpose of law, to him, was to ensure a just society and secure the rights of man. In that respect he displayed the classical influence of Plato.

On the bench, his pronouncements evinced in very great measure the most desirable traits in a judge -- courage, integrity and a fierce independence. His firm belief in the primacy of liberty and democratic values led to peerless judgements which rank as his highest achievements. For those of us who remember and are imbued



with a sense of history, his fearless espousal of the rights of the people of Bangladesh especially during the Ayub regime, will forever be deeply embedded in our minds.

He was never the quintessential politician although he was associated with every major political movement in his time. Among these were the language movement of 1952 and the 21-point programme of 1954 associated with the United Front. His speeches during the roundtable conference convened by Ayub Khan in 1969 stirred the hearts and minds of the people of Pakistan. His contributions towards the 11-point programme of that year was considerable. During the 1971 liberation war his outright refusal to speak out in favour of the Pakistanis was an act of tremendous courage. Above all, he was always relentless in resisting evil, with great fortitude and never allowed himself to be swayed by

pressure.

Even in the midst of an active life he always found time to support worthy social causes. His intimate association with the Anjuman-e-Mufidul Islam during the great Bengal famine of 1943 is one such example. A deeply religious man, who had helped to establish and later inaugurated the Alia Madrasah in Dhaka, he was at the same time above all communal prejudice. In that respect his efforts to promote communal harmony especially during riots leading to the famous Liaquat-Nehru Pact of 1950 were extremely important. Apart from being a very cultured man, his activities as a patron of the arts was considerable.

In short, he was a man of parts. Any attempt to enumerate his accomplishments will fall short of doing justice to him. Such an undertaking would be a Herculean task. I, for one aim not equal to such a task nor is there enough space to do so here. He can be best described as: "Justice Murshed is the autobiography of his own age." As such he has transcended his own times and his memory continues to be the object of our deepest respect. It is our earnest wish that his achievements find a permanent place not only in the intellectual and legal institutions but in the entire nation. That will serve as a source of inspiration and unity to us all and lend a sense of direction to our society.

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Is reading going out of fashion?

HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

I have a feeling that more and more people are quitting the habit of not only smoking but also reading. Quitting smoking, though a good idea, is often involuntary. The cost of smoking keeps rising, the government and non-smokers nag more, community becomes more intolerant, and people become more health conscious. But what explains quitting the reading habit? Are there social forces at work that make us turn away from the habit of reading?

It seems that diet is one of the key metaphors of our time. Many people are on a diet when it comes to reading or serious intellectual activities. Some are on a diet in the sense of avoiding food so that they can remain slim forever with no excess fat; others do the same for reading. They avoid it as if too much reading will make them lethargic, immobile with their heads in the cloud. Not that people are not reading at all, some are reading but they are reading mostly "how to" books, books that are practical guides. People are reading things that are deemed to be useful for career enhancement. My concern is reading for the joy of reading. Reading widens our horizons as late Guru Syed Mujtaba Ali, a Tagore and Goethe aficionado, once lamented that we do not have eight eyes like the flies who can see many things all at the same time. For us poor humans,

we can enhance our capacity to see many things all at a time and widen our vision only through reading. While on an intellectual diet we may read books on real diet but not books containing words of wisdom by Mujtaba Ali.

But is it the case that modern society is putting blinders on us so that we can only see limited things. In the age of specialisation reading narrowly may be more productive. Specialisation often produces a tunnel vision and it is rewarded in

"In the past people did not have enough entertainment, therefore, they had to read for pleasure; now there are so many ways one can entertain oneself that make reading unnecessary".

A seventeen year old said: "Rather than reading a book, one would like to go to a movie based on that book. You know the story, what will happen at the end faster. In two hours you know basically what is there to know. Why read a book which is expensive both in

intellectual colleague Anne complained after a trip to US that in her hotel they supplied *USA Today* and not the *New York Times*. We want everything as fast as possible. We want a fast track education and then we want to be rich fast. We want a fast car as we want a faster computer and even speedier Internet connection.

Is decline in reading texts a sign of the rise of the digital society? Is the arrival of information society undermining knowledge society?

Is decline in reading texts a sign of the rise of the digital society? Is the arrival of information society undermining knowledge society? In the US a survey conducted by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) last year found that literary reading is in dramatic decline with fewer than half of American adults now reading literature.

the world of experts and specialists. What happened to reading for its own sake?

I put this question to a number of young people aged 19 to 22. These are some of the sample answers:

"In the past people needed to read books to find out about things and places, now they can go to those places to see things for themselves, or see those places on television, or they can access information via Internet so they do not need to read".

"Time is scarcer now. There is hardly any time for reading, especially for junior college students who spend all their time doing home work and preparing for the A-level examinations".

terms of time and cost?" Modern society is making us impatient. We need to get to the end now and not after 230 pages. Graffiti on my colleague Maribeth's T-Shirt says: "Life is short, eat the dessert first".

Is it part of the phenomenon that sociologist Ritzer called, "McDonaldization"? We want not only fast food; we also want fast banking (ATM machine is to a bank, what McDonalds is to a restaurant). We want McPaper, newspaper that can be read very fast say between the starting and get off points on a bus ride. When *USA Today* was launched in the 1980s it was immediately labelled as McPaper. Recently my

In the US a survey conducted by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) last year found that literary reading is in dramatic decline with fewer than half of American adults now reading literature. But fewer than half is not all that bad when we compare that 3 out of 20, a figure I arrived at when I asked a bunch of 20 young people whose honesty, if not reading habit, is impeccable. The US study found an overall decline of 10 percentage points in literary readers from 1982 to 2002, which translated in actual numbers, meant a loss of 20 million potential readers.

The July 2004 NEA survey also found that literature readers

watched an average of 2.7 hours of television each day, while people who do not read literary works watched an average of 3.1 hours daily. When I read Bimal Mitra's *Kori Diey Kinlam* (in two volumes over 1500 pages) as a secondary school student I had no access to television. We had electricity, radio, and books but no television. And all the members of the household--my late father, mother, and other siblings took turns to read the book. My mother at 82 still recommends Bengali novels to me as she squints to read. We did not have the distractions of satellite television, hand phones, MSN chats, online gaming, Blackberry, and PlayStation2. Thank God for that.

Bob Herbert of the *New York Times* wrote in his obituary on Arthur Miller, the great American playwright and the public intellectual, "Mr. Miller understood early that keeping the population entertained was becoming the paramount imperative of the U.S. We're now all but buried in entertainment and the republic is running amok. Mr. Miller is gone, and if we're not wise enough to pay attention, his uncomfortable truths will die with him. (He felt, among other things, that most men and women know "little or nothing" about the forces manipulating their lives.)

I wonder how widely generalisable these words are today!

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Water, soil and highrise buildings

MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

THIS is to bring to the citizens' humble notice and for careful observation of Dhaka City's suicidal development and high rise construction spree destroying rules and ethics of Nature on many counts. The so called multistoreyed and highrise buildings here are in most cases harmfully designed and built, simply unfriendly to Nature and its' rules and principles. This is very fast inviting for natural disasters like earthquakes and land slides not to speak of suffocating the atmosphere. May Allah save us from catastrophes, although we are colossally disobeying Nature's rules continuously, whimsically and arbitrarily, for our short-sighted interests and profits. The under-noted few reasons need be seriously considered and problems honestly solved at the earliest:

As we know water is the richest gift to mankind from Allah. There are three sources for it: 1) surface water, 2) rain water, 3) sub-soil water. In Dhaka City, we are constantly exploiting the third source, and thus creating a sharp and vast imbalance. Ninety percent

of Dhaka city's water requirement is met from sub-soil sources alone, which is highly suicidal. The other two sources are unwisely avoided. The result may be an early fall, collapse and destruction.

Because, the layers of soil on Earth are eternally and wisely arranged in order to strike an immaculate natural balance, constantly protecting us from disorders and disasters. Moreover, the weight and load distribution on Earth demands to be evenly and properly done. In case of high rise buildings on small space (which is done for our short-sighted interest), the weight, pressure and load distribution is improper and faulty. This is a commission of crime against Nature. Allah forbid, we may have to pay for it heavily. If we disturb and disrupt Nature, it might get irritated and revolt. We ought to be very careful. In most other parts of the world, it is not done so, for selfprotection, peace and safety. They do not defy Nature's rules and not irritate Nature for keeping peace and security. Enough is enough. We have to be alert (without delay) and stop it.

Because of too many high rise buildings spreading over a small

area/zone of the city, this concentrated enormous heavy load and pressure may bring about snap landslides causing disasters. Warning and alert signals are already there for us. Earthquake coupled with landslides/slips is imminent threat to us for our misdoing and mistakes which we are just repeating continuously.

As we know Dhaka city area falls within one of the earthquake risk zones as per expert survey and international survey report (about two years back). In TV it was telecast as an international documentary for 2/3 days consecutively and surprisingly further telecast was suspended. If it is for suppression then it is not the answer nor solution.

Highrise buildings should be carefully permitted considering various aspects, honestly following rules, regulations and conditions of keeping ample vacant space. In a nutshell, in Dhaka city, there has already been more than enough high rise buildings. Now it ought to be discouraged for the greater welfare of the citizens.

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