

Preposterous conflict within the EC

We want an authentic voter-list

HOW blasé the Election Commission can get to the next general election is amply demonstrated by its failure to hold a single meeting on the voter-list preparation agenda in the last two and a half months. Read it with the ruling BNP-led coalition's field placements as far as the election engineering goes, you have a preparatory mix that hardly inspires confidence in the shape of things to come.

On the specific subject of electoral roll preparation -- involving multi-layered activities -- still going unattended, when the elections are closing in on us, the EC couldn't have behaved more irresponsibly. Two and a half months of its extremely limited lead-time has been squandered on the conflicting stances taken by the chief election commissioner and the two election commissioners on the voter-list issue. The CEC is for preparing a new electoral roll while the election commissioners who are supposed to assist him hold a contrary view saying that law needs to be amended if the EC is to draw up a new list. They are for an update of the old list instead of an arduous new undertaking to have a fresh electoral roll. But the fact of the matter is, previous voter-lists were prepared without requiring any law to be amended. In the CEC's judgement, there is no legal bar to having a fresh list; but look, how a running battle of wills within such a small body as EC has denuded a very precious block of time away from the limited period available to the EC for the indispensable exercise.

Isn't there any rules of business between the CEC and his commissioners? If the answer is in the negative, then the overriding impression is, the EC doesn't deserve to be called a statutory body. We wonder, if a judicial intervention will be necessary to interpret the equations between the CEC and the commissioners in the light of the Constitution?

No one is in any doubt that we need an authentic voter-list as the sine qua non for a free and fair general election. How obsolete and antithetical to the concept of free election the 2001 electoral roll has become is brought home by a survey conducted last year by the Washington-based organisation, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI). The findings of the sample survey are: there were 64 lakh potentially erroneous names on the 2001 voters' list and that 27 lakh eligible voters might not have been registered at all.

We are not interested in the squabble over an update of the electoral roll or preparation of a new one. What the nation must have is a fully authentic and comprehensively enfranchising voter-list for the next election. Nothing short of it will be acceptable.

Vanishing bus tickets

Rescue the helpless passengers

IT is common knowledge that every year an artificial crisis is created revolving around transport tickets and these are sold in the black market -- much to the inconvenience of the homebound passengers. But this year, perhaps both in terms of the modus operandi and the magnitude of crisis, all previous records seem set to be surpassed.

Racketeers have started their business of mopping up tickets early in the day taking advantage of the heavy rain which is keeping the intending passengers from the inter-district bus counters. Needless to say, brokers are collecting the tickets to sell them at a much higher price -- often three times the normal fare. They have already bought off thousands of tickets, thereby taking a near-monopoly hold of the market and forcing the passengers to be at their mercy.

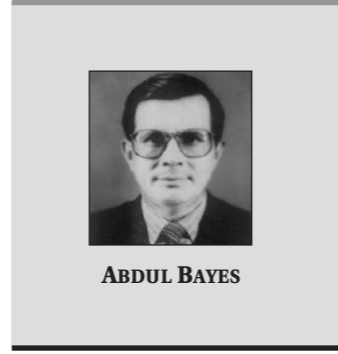
Things must have gone wrong at more than one point. There is clearly a nexus between the transport workers and the racketeers, and a deep-rooted connivance between these syndicates and the powers that be, for there is little doubt that without the nod or abatement from local powerful groups, with some political clout, the whole business could not have thrived.

This is totally unacceptable. The government has to do something to streamline the ticketing business that cheats millions of people.

The transport operators are charging much higher fares than allowable at the rate of 80 paise per kilometer they had agreed to apply in an understanding with the government. They may not be happy with the rate, but they cannot cash in on the plight of passengers prior to a major festival. This is another example of organised profiteering in a high demand perspective that is highly condemnable.

The government should take note of what is happening and adopt such measures as will ensure a steady flow of bus tickets and at affordable fares. It's more than a question of enforcing law, it's a question of protecting the huge number of people from being fleeced.

Rainfed agriculture: Realities, realisations and responses



ABDUL BAYES

THE discourses on the development of agriculture in South Asian countries, during the last few decades, mostly dealt with irrigated agriculture. Policy perceptions and prescriptions for agricultural development were principally pitted against the potentials of those areas. Admittedly, the search for food security in a regime of very high man/land ratio led to the advent of Green Revolution under the aegis of irrigation and high yielding varieties (HYVs). Assured water supply, seeds and extension services were all set to see self-sufficiency in staple foods. Undeniably, perhaps, the agricultural strategy at that time worked well to put the respective countries on an even keel as far as self-sufficiency in staple food grain is concerned.

But in economics, you always have to live with a trade-off. Disconcertingly though, during the period of green revolution and till now, rainfed areas -- constituting nearly two-thirds of cultivated areas in a country like India -- continue to be bypassed in terms of investment, innovation and institutional developments. Whereas these areas embrace most of the poor people with great potentials. Rainfed areas were thus left behind the burner. Inequality in income and other indicators increased between rainfed and irrigated regions. But empirical evidences tend to show that the rate of return on investment in rainfed areas surpassed that of irrigated areas for

High Value Agricultural Crops. Furthermore, rainfed areas retain certain sustainable features which are unlikely to be in evidence in irrigated areas. Special mention may be made of the green agriculture.

However, once in the back seat, the rainfed agriculture came to attract the attention of the researchers in recent times. The recently held international conference on "Public-Private Partnership for Harnessing the Potential

Poor Public-Private Partnership" in harnessing the potentials of rainfed agriculture. Perhaps he rightly assumed that all that glitters is not gold; and so all that is growth may not help poverty reduction. Partnership of any kind should not part with the poor. However, in the face of paucity of space, I shall concentrate on few of the "success" stories pertaining to such partnership discussed in the conference

ers mourn over the meager money they received in exchange. However, the partnership established between government, traders, farmers, and village leaders in technology transfer, organisation, training, marketing, quality control and other facilities went a long way in mitigating the menace in the supply chain to a large extent. Ipso facto, as a result of the improved supply chain, mango growers in Mali witnessed a 5-fold

sweet for farmers.

The farmers' association started dialogues with government and private sectors about their problems. Thanks to the sponsors, Kanchan and his associates traveled to Spain and other grape growing countries to know about the technology of harvesting and storage. They also came to know about how to build watersheds in drought zones to cultivate grape. Grapes are now grown widely in

presented so far for the sake of sending the message that Public- Private Partnership could pave ways for poverty reduction. If targeted as pro-poor, the partnership would serve sustainably. The moot question, however, is why such partnership works effectively in some pockets while others fail to follow the suit? What agro-ecological and socio-economic parameters account for the differentials? These case studies should be the basis of researches in scaling up operations. One should draw upon the case studies and try to replicate them or dig out the causes of the differentials. By and large -- a la Ishaer Allhuwalia -- the rainfed areas warrant urgent attention from policy makers on the following grounds: (a) enormous potentiality even with constraints; (b) ground water poses a problem but water preservation and conservation can boost rainfed areas with HVA; (c) majority of the poor live in those areas and (d) rainfed areas are fertile grounds for green agriculture especially high value agriculture.

Permit partnership

Public sector investment is needed in those areas to crowd in private investment. A wave of second green revolution should be set in the motion soon to see that development of rainfed areas help balanced growth of agriculture in every country. But not by public sector alone. According to Ashok Gulati of IFPRI, the very success in food grain production over the last few decades and the changing pattern of food habits call for a change of policies in agriculture where rainfed areas should be rewarded with investment, technology and researches. With the realities on ground and the realisation in mind, one would expect that the responses should be as quick as possible.

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BENEATH THE SURFACE

According to Ashok Gulati of IFPRI, the very success in food grain production over the last few decades and the changing pattern of food habits call for a change of policies in agriculture where rainfed areas should be rewarded with investment, technology and researches. With the realities on ground and the realisation in mind, one would expect that the responses should be as quick as possible.

of Rainfed Agriculture" is a pointer to this effect. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), The Federation of Indian Council of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) jointly organised the conference in New Delhi. Perhaps, the purpose was to help change the traditional mind-set and set the stage for a broad-based agricultural growth in the economy. For example, to attain a growth rate of 8 per cent in the economy, the Indian agriculture must grow at no less than 4 per cent per annum and that is difficult to be derived from irrigated agriculture alone. Besides, the irrigated areas have already been on the fence of falling productivity.

Readers might note that the very title of the conference suggests that three P's -- Public-Private Partnership (PPP) -- might help a broad-based agricultural growth so much needed to raise the over all economic growth to a higher pace. But Joachim von Braun -- the DG of IFPRI -- placed two more additional P's to call it a "Pro-

Mangoes in Mali

Karl M Rich and Clare Narrod of IFPRI presented a case study on how such public-private partnership helped mango growers in Mali overcome some of the obstacles they faced. Historically and elsewhere, mango growers of Mali found their markets fail frequently. The reasons are, for example, information asymmetries, organisational failures, high transaction costs and regulatory failures. The most hardly hit segments of the farms in such failures are the small holders, especially, those producing perishable products. According to the researchers, a partnership could (a) allow actors to pool resources and risks in investment to create mutual benefits and (b) combine the efficiencies of the private sector with the social equity aspects of public intervention and remedy market failures that cannot be undertaken by public or private sectors.

The supply chain bedeviled with low productivity and high post-harvest losses, poor logistic and marketing capabilities and limited value addition led Mali mango grow-

increase in export volume in 2 years, a reduction of shipping times by half, diversification of exports, 25 per cent increase in farm gate prices and employment generation in packing houses. It means that chain-wide partnerships in Mali were crucial to address market failures and integrate small-holders. Rich and Narrod also narrated how such a partnership also worked well in Thailand.

Sour grapes turned sweet

Not very long ago, sweet grapes of India appeared sour to the growers, especially to small ones. Mr Sopan Kanchan is the chairman of the association of the grape producers called MAHAGRAPES who eloquently narrated the thick and thin journey which grape producers undertook in the past. At the beginning of export business, some of their assignments were refused on the plea of poor quality. Neither technology nor testing facilities were available to make grapes grow well. Many growers groaned due to the lack of infrastructural facilities and thus had to quit business. But Kanchan et al were determined to turn sour grapes

rainfed and in irrigated areas. Public and private partnerships paved ways for a better future as far as export of grapes are concerned. There has been a rise in export volumes over the years, an increase in prices of grapes and betterment of the livelihoods of the grape growers.

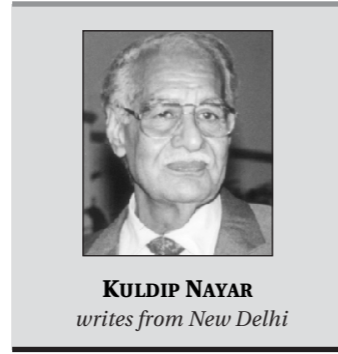
Barind-barriers

Dr Anisur Rahman of PRAN posited the potentials that Barind tract has now assumed than ever before. Once known as a pocket of poverty owing to the lack of irrigation facilities, agriculture in Barind tract reportedly has been on a good gear. The investments made by the government in irrigation facilities are now contributing to crop diversification. Private agro-processors like PRAN and others are approaching farmers for contract growing, particularly in the production of perishables. Some of the export quality rice is also being grown in the Barind tract. As a result of public investments, private investments are crowding in Barind tract.

Creating many cases

Just few of the case studies have been

SAARC-ing democracy



KULDIP NAYYAR
writes from New Delhi

INDIA does not seem to be conscious of the role it has to play in South Asia in the coming years. It is not about thwarting the Chinese influence against which Jawaharlal Nehru warned the region after the Sino-India war in 1962. India's predicament is going to be how to help the neighbouring countries that are afflicted with one problem or the other.

The biggest challenge is the constraints on democracy in varying degrees in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and the Maldives which along with Sri Lanka and Bhutan comprise the SAARC. Whatever name the nations may give to their polity, it is deficient in freedom and restricts people's say. The system is authoritarian in tone and tenor and caters to fundamentalism or other lesser instincts of man to justify itself.

It is not that one was not aware of such distortions, but the half-yearly

bureau meeting of South Asian Human Rights (SAHR) at Delhi a few days ago brought home the truth once again. The bureau members from different countries made no secret of the fear and the sense of insecurity in which they lived. They admitted that their government was all time lessening space for people and imposing ever-new draconian measures to suppress freedom.

In SAHR they have a forum tran-

sports' intensity of pain as they told their tale of woes. It was the same story in every country -- the story of nexus between anti-social elements and the rulers, between the corrupt and political bosses.

Still all eyes were fixed on India which they considered an oasis in the desert of their blighted hopes. A Pakistani delegate said: "Good relations with India may bring us back democracy." India's open society,

and, two, the incidence of extra-judicial killings. This was over and above the traditional political intolerance, repression on the opposition and politicisation of government servants within the overall environment of widespread corruption.

The Pakistan delegate felt that the governance by Musharraf would become rather difficult since people felt that the army failed to provide aid to the quake victims when it was

accused of providing the Maoists with food or shelter and the use of civilians under duress as informers, thereby placing them at risk of facing reprisals by the Maoists.

"Arbitrary arrest and detention, closely linked to cases of disappearance, were among the most common violations," said the three-member delegation. The king was seen a problem, not a solution. New Delhi was accused of playing a double

BETWEEN THE LINES

Discussions at the SAHR bureau conclave did not throw up any collective idea to check the violation of rule of law or human rights in South Asia. Nor was there any confidence that democracy could be restored in all the countries in the region. Yet, there was a resolve to deepen democracy in South Asia, SAHR's priority till the end of November 2006 when its general body meets at New Delhi.

scending borders and religions to voice their grievances collectively and help one another to get back their dignity and liberty. The organisation is roughly five years old. Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen talks about it in glowing terms in his latest book, The Argumentative India. He says, "these citizens' meetings, whenever organised, tend to attract extensive participation. Just as India and Pakistan seemed to be heading for a violent military confrontation."

At the two-day meeting of SAHR last week, one could feel the partici-

pants' intensity of pain as they told their tale of woes. It was the same story in every country -- the story of nexus between anti-social elements and the rulers, between the corrupt and political bosses.

Still all eyes were fixed on India which they considered an oasis in the desert of their blighted hopes. A Pakistani delegate said: "Good relations with India may bring us back democracy." India's open society,

needed most. Musharraf was giving more and more space to the mullahs to retain his uniform. The delegate said that people enjoyed no freedom and lately even the press was under pressure. The delegation from Nepal quoted extensively from the report of the office of the High Commission for Human Rights. The country had been experiencing "a grave human rights crisis" for a long time. There were extra-judicial executions, indiscriminate shooting or bombing leading to the deaths of civilians, threats to members of the local population

game, giving military assistance to Kathmandu on the one hand and offering assurances to political parties for democratic structure on the other. The delegation conceded that the political parties in Nepal had yet to iron out their differences.

Sri Lanka's representative said that the demise of democracy in his country was taking place because extremist elements among the Buddhist monks were joining politics. It was conceded that the distance between the Sinhalese and the Tam-

ils had not been spanned, although both increasingly felt that they had to live together. India could do a lot and "put pressure on Tamils" said the Sri Lankan delegation while underlining the "indifference of New Delhi. If ever there was any settlement, it would have to be through India."

The Indian delegation admitted that the problem of fundamentalism, terrorism and political opportunism beleaguered them as much as it tormented other countries in the region. It had a free society but it was becoming increasingly lawless because of power politics. The economic growth of 8.1 per cent had not licked poverty, although a new legislation for full employment assured half of rural India 150 days of job in a year.

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Kuldip Nayyar is an eminent Indian columnist.

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.

Dhanmondi R/A

Dhanmondi residential area has long become a veritable commercial zone. We the residents are faced with horrible traffic jams lasting for hours almost every day. Footpaths are inaccessible due to encroachments and unauthorised shops. Noise pollution has reached an unbearable level forcing us to remain indoors with windows shut.

At the beginning of the Holy Ramadan, we the residents of Road-12A faced a new problem. An illegal shop, "rented" by some officials of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) on the southeastern corner of the Abahani playground mounted four powerful loudspeakers on the tree and started blaring religious slogans and sermons day and night with azaan. The fact is that there is a huge community mosque within less than 60 yards from the spot near the Dhanmondi lake. However, the microphones were

finally removed by the law enforcers, but the illegal shop still exists.

Through your paper we are appealing to the BCB and the police administration to look into the matter. **A resident of Dhanmondi Dhaka**

Can we afford pure food?

As the debate on pure food rages, we are now faced with the vital question--can the majority of the society afford pure food at all? The vicious cycle of poverty is playing an active role here. It doesn't matter what the political players say, we all know that the hapless populace of this country is compelled to live on the brink of poverty. So, for them it is not a matter of choosing cheaper soybean-oil over more expensive and healthier corn-oil or buying coarse rice instead of fine rice. Financially they are in such

a marginal state that they really cannot pay for food-items if the cost is even fractionally higher for any reason whatsoever! Thus, they do not mind if the oil is adulterated or if the rice is rotten as long as the price is within their hardy reach. As such, it is not only a case of preventing the sellers from offering such sub-standard foodstuff, but also the government has to check the general masses so that they do not go for those!

The administration has got to decide now whether the pure-food drive will be extended up to road-side eateries and small grocery shops at all -- if not, where to draw the line? We are already seeing some articles/writes-ups in The Daily Star dwelling on this issue. **CNR Chittagong National government**

The recent political developments in Germany is quite interesting and thought-provoking. The social democrats and the Christian democrats have allied together to form a coalition government. The former have been allocated eight ministries and the Christian democrats six. We think it's a very healthy trend.

In our political scenario if our major political parties could rally round and form a national government, the whole country could have been benefited. We could have bade farewell to hartals, loss of working hours, vandalism, anarchy, mud-slinging, character assassination, terrorism, etc. They could effectively combat the fast growing pointless, self-destructive religious terrorism, which has unfortunately emerged as top priority on our national agenda. It is a more virulent virus than HIV. **We feel that there ought to be a**

mechanism which would rather force them -- the sane political parties to form a coalition and cooperate with each other. The country, the economy and the vast majority of the population can be saved by this phenomenon only. **SN Mamoon Dhaka**

Tata's investment

This is about the report published in a Dhaka daily: Tata-NBR talks hit rock bottom (Sat, 15 Oct 2005). It is surprising to notice (at least to my eyes) that the leading Bangladesh newspapers skipped the above sensitive yet very important news item regarding Tata's investment initiative.

If you are able to read between the lines, this one report may give you, the real picture of the concerns for the foreign investment initiatives,

questionable development incentives, the balance of economy between the local and the foreign industry, the bureaucratic stand-points, regional co-operation framework, the role of major newspapers in matters of national interests, the shadows of corruption slowly approaching in the scenario and the questions whispering around our minds.

Definitely, at the end of the day we hope the resolution on this matter will be taken focusing on our national pride and interest and the future. We expect that the NBR will solve this matter in its own 'sharp and smiling' diplomatic way, yet NOT compromising the national interest of Bangladesh. In the mean time let us applaud and inspire all the righteous individuals who are in the decision making loop. **Echo Azhar**

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If it comes...

There is reason to believe that an earthquake will occur in this part of the world in the very near future. Recently, an earthquake struck parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, killed people in huge numbers, and reduced homes to rubble. Can we imagine what will happen to us in the event of an earthquake?

We will be like ants trying to dig out people, buried in rubble, using hands. Children will cry for a drop of water, a piece of bread and a blanket in cold nights. They will look at the sun, which will only give them heat.

According to available reports, multi-storied apartments and commercial establishments are very likely to get destroyed in an earthquake. If

that happens, who will survive in these buildings? Children are known as the nation-builders of a society, where will the nation-builders be when the decades old structures of schools will fall down with screaming of the little boys and girls?

What will happen to the old part of the city? Narrow roads, famous local restaurants, houses built and attached together run the risk of being smoothed. Is there anyone in the country who is really concerned about the situation? Is the government doing anything to minimise the losses in the event of an earthquake? Aren't we wasting valuable time?

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