Blood-stained coal of Phulbari

NAZRUL ISLAM

Is it impossible to extract the coal ourselves? How much does it cost to extract the coal? Actually, coal extraction is not at all a very high-tech matter. The investment required for the Phulbari coalmine is not a big one either (only $ 1.5 billion). The government can, itself, extract the coal by forming a company, or our local investors can come forward, by forming a consortium. In that case our resources will remain in our country and we can endure the losses to be wrought by the mining process.

"WE will not spare a single particle of our land. We shall protect Phulbari even with our blood. We will not allow anybody to destroy Phulbari in the name of implementing the so-called coal-mine project." These were the words, and inscriptions, in the placards carried by thousands of people who demonstrated for the first time in Phulbari on July 9, 2005 to raise their voices against implementation of Asia Energy's coal-mine project.

Exactly after 410 days, on August 26, the soil of Phulbari was stained with the blood of more than half a dozen of its sons who wanted to protect their ancestral lands, livelihood and ecology. Police, and paramilitary BDR, opened fire on a demonstration 1.5 km away from the Asia Energy office which was scheduled to be hemmed in by locals. The firing left a hundred others injured, and some were reported still missing.

But it was altogether a different scene on Wednesday August 30 -- Phulbari people celebrating victory of their agitation. The government ultimately accepted their demands including saying 'no' to Asia Energy and open-pit mining. The government also agree to provide compensation to the families of the victims and the government representative termed the August 26 incident as "very inhumane". And as per the agreement, from now on the government would decide the method of mining on the basis of public opinion.

They did everything but why after so much of bitter experience, why not after the first demonstration last year? The question remains.

Attack on innocent, and unarmed, protesters is not a new incident in our country. About a dozen people were killed in Kansat, Chapainawabganj, early this year in police firing while they were demonstrating against the harassment by the Palli Bidyut Samity officials, and demanding uninterrupted supply of electricity. It was observed that the law-enforcers were increasingly becoming intolerant, and not showing the minimum restraint while dealing with the masses. This is the outcome of widespread politicisation of a disciplined force, many believe.

The people of Phulbari have every right, and every reason, to lodge a protest against the open-pit coalmine project in their area, which they perceive as a threat to their very existence. Not only the locals, but the countrymen, also, have the responsibility to protect their resources from being plundered by foreigners. Allowing extraction of coal from the Phulbari mine by the open-pit system would be tantamount to committing murder, not only of the 6 lakh people of four upazilas of Dinajpur, but also of the two crore people of northern Bangladesh, some observed.

Gainers and losers

Who would be the beneficiaries of the project and who the losers? It was asked time and again and shown that the people of Phulbari would be the first victims losing their ancestral homes, farmlands, water bodies, hundreds of thousands of tress and so on. They would also lose their jobs, livelihood, culture and social setup. Apart from the direct losses, they would have to pay high compensation in the form of health hazards, pollution, waste management and living cost etc.

It was told that the next victims would be the people of the neighbouring districts of the project site. People of at least 12 districts of greater Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna and Rajshahi would be seriously affected by the acid mine drainage (AMD), and ground level ozone contamination which are associated with open-pit mining. AMD is metal rich water formed by the chemical reaction between water and rocks containing sulphur-bearing minerals. The acid runoff dissolves heavy metals such as copper, lead, mercury in ground water and surface water. Environmental effects of AMD include contamination of drinking water, and disrupted growth and reproduction of aquatic plants and animals.

But the authorities did not pay any heed to this.

The subsequent losers would be the country, and its people. Known energy resources, especially fossil fuels, are dwindling fast across the globe. On the other hand the appetite for energy is continuously growing in the West where people are living more luxuriously. The multi-national companies (MNCs) of those countries launched a massive hunt for energy, firstly across Africa, and in recent years in Asia, for meeting the high energy demands of the developed nations, especially of America and Europe.

We know that Bangladesh has only about 3 TCF of known gas reserves, and some coal reserves in the northern districts of Dinajpur and Rangpur. In fact, these two fossil fuels are our only known natural resources. If we make a mistake in handling the exploration, and use, of these two resources the country will have to face dire consequences in future. But these two resources have already caught the eagle eyes of the MNCs. And unfortunately, knowingly or unknowingly, our politicians and technocrats/bureaucrats have already stepped onto the apparently wrong track in many instances, especially in gas exploration, and are now in coal extraction. However, the unequal contract signed with Asia Energy stands scrapped now apparently to the benefit of both the country and the people.

In an earlier article published on July 22, 2005 in The Daily Star, I had furnished a conservative calculation of how much the country will get, and how much the people will lose, after implementation of the project. As far as the existing royalty is concerned, Bangladesh was supposed to get 6 percent from the coal extraction. This means that the country would get 24 million tons of coal (out of 400 million tons), worth Tk 9,072 crore, at the current international market price of $ 60 per ton. But what price to give to the local people? The total loss would stand at Tk 25,000 crore in the next 50 years. If we include the cost of the environmental damage, and losses of the surrounding districts, the figure would certainly be bigger.

How much Asia Energy was supposed to get? The company would, reportedly, invest $ 1.5 billion for the next 30 years (Tk 9300 crore), and would get 376 million metric tons of coal worth $ 22.56 billion (Tk 142,100 crore).

Harbinger of development!

The Asia Energy Corporation (Bangladesh) Pvt Ltd, in their brochure and website, had been furnishing exaggerated figures on the beneficial effects of the project for the Bangladeshi people, along with mentioning how much labour and resources that would have to be deployed to benefit the people. They were also ensuring a bright future for the people through implementation of the coalmine. Going through their write-ups, it seemed that they had come here as if to offer missionary services to the people of Bangladesh with little intention to profit from the project!

Asia Energy claimed that the Phulbari coalmine had the potential to transform northwest Bangladesh into a mining and industrial region, and bring new wealth, employment and opportunity to a predominantly poor, subsistence level, agricultural economy. Directly it would create 2,100 jobs during the mine's construction, and provide a long-term average of 1100 jobs.

The MNCs always paint visions of prosperity with more industries coming to the area in due course to provide jobs. But there always remains a gulf of difference between the promises and reality.

But how the people of Phulbari were supposed to be benefited? According to the company, 50,000 people would be resettled (actually victims would not be less than 6 lakh) and the company would be able to provide 2100 jobs initially, and 1100 jobs subsequently. But who would get the highly skilled jobs, obviously not the people of the locality. Being displaced from the their homelands and farming professions, and devastated by toxic wastes and other environmental hazards, what benefit would the people of the four upazilas get?

Hanging carrot

The multinational companies hang carrots in front of people, but do not hand them over. People of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, DR Congo and some other African countries were surely shown a dream by the MNCs who were exploring their natural resources. But the fate of the general people of those countries did not change, except for a few individuals having access to the corridors of state power.

Asia Energy was assuring the people that they would be rehabilitated elsewhere. But would it be possible to provide the displaced people with same type of homesteads they would lose? Besides, villages are built over hundreds of years, and people live in their homes generation after generation. The memories of, and the love for, their own homestead can never be compensated.

Why foreign company for coal extraction?

Is it impossible to extract the coal ourselves? How much does it cost to extract the coal? Actually, coal extraction is not at all a very high-tech matter. The investment required for the Phulbari coalmine is not a big one either (only $ 1.5 billion). The government can, itself, extract the coal by forming a company, or our local investors can come forward, by forming a consortium. In that case our resources will remain in our country and we can endure the losses to be wrought by the mining process.

The bloodshed and the subsequent outrage deterred the government from finally offering the coalmine to a foreign company. History shows the blood of struggling people seldom goes in vain.

Nazrul Islam is a free-lance journalist and environmentalist.

Noise pollution: Need for appropriate laws

We came to know from reliable sources that the draft laws are still waiting in the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs for vetting. As the end of the present government's tenure is imminent, we therefore urge them to take immediate and necessary actions to promulgate the laws before they step down, or else it will be hung up for an indefinite period of time.

MD. SIRAJUL ISLAM MOLLA

NOISE pollution is a growing concern nowadays, especially in the cities of Bangladesh. The inhabitants of Dhaka city are the major victims of this pollution. Approximately 12 million people are now living in Dhaka where traffic congestion is a regular phenomenon almost on every road, every lane and by-lane. This traffic congestion is the root cause of noise pollution as most of the motor vehicles, especially buses, mini-buses and trucks have hydraulic horns and the drivers are trained to honk continuously until they get their ways. Other causes for honking include reckless driving, overtaking, and drivers' lack of knowledge of the impact of noise pollution. Moreover, the racket from various construction sites in the locality and the misuse of loudspeakers are two more factors that contribute to noise pollution.

The magnitude of noise pollution in Dhaka is measured at different times by different organizations and the Department of Environment. Researchers of the Society for Assistance to Hearing Impaired Children (SAHIC) at Mohakhali measured the level of noise exposure in Dhaka city few years ago. Different key intersections including the major intercity bus terminals and also some elite areas of Dhaka city were randomly selected to measure the levels of noise pollution by the appropriate Noise Level Meter. The noise levels measured at different parts of Dhaka city varied between 68 and 106 decibels. At some intersections the noise level was above 100 decibels, while at some other thoroughfares 70 to 100 decibels were recorded. The lowest level was 68 decibels, measured in the diplomatic zone, as opposed to the 45-decibel-tolerance level, recommended by WHO. In a seminar organized by Sunder Jiban, Dr. Manash Ranjan Chakraborty, former ENT Specialist of SAHIC, presented the data as mentioned above.

Even city schools and hospitals are not protected from the noisy atmosphere. Most schools and hospitals face acute noise pollution, as signs indicating "silent zone" are seldom seen adjacent to hospitals and educational institutions. And even if there are signs, I wonder who cares to follow them closely. At rush hours, drivers honk desperately to beat the traffic in front of different educational institutions, jamming the roads even more. The results of a survey conducted by the Department of Environment in 20 schools and hospitals of the city at sensitive locations revealed that the noise pollution in those locations was between 67.19 and 75.35 decibels, which is double the permissible level of 26-40 decibels as prescribed by WHO.

Noise pollution is no less hazardous than any other pollution. According to Dr. Manash Ranjan Chakraborty, prolonged exposure to higher noise could cause temporary and permanent mental and physical disorders in human beings. It could also lead to headaches, mental stress, sleeplessness, high blood pressure, cardiac failure, respiratory disorder as well as miscarriage of child-bearing women, low-birth weight for premature birth and attention lapses of students. A survey, conducted by the Work for a Better Bangladesh among 2,500 people of whom 1,000 were students, found 97% students were disturbed by noise pollution and 60-70% experienced difficulty in concentration, headache and aggravation as a result of noise pollution. Out of these 2,500 people, 69% had headache, 68% had aggravation, 49% had bad temper, 42% had problems in hearing, 42% had irregular heartbeats and 39% had trouble sleeping.

The noise pollution can be reduced, creating mass awareness through various programmes such as seminars, symposia, workshops, community mobilization, etc. As drivers of motor vehicles are mostly responsible for creating noise pollution, proper training before they get their license can play a significant role in reducing this pollution. The BRTA should introduce training programmes to sensitize drivers to the insidious nature of noise pollution. Strong political commitment can also reduce the pollution dramatically. However, the most important thing is for the government to promulgate appropriate laws and enforce it firmly through the law-enforcing agencies. An environmental court may expedite the enforcement of laws. Understanding this demand of the time, the government, in consultation with the concerned individuals and organizations, drafted some laws in November 2003 to control noise pollution. They distributed it among the concerned organizations and individuals for their review and suggestions in February 2004. On behalf of Sunder Jiban, I myself also suggested some modifications and sent it to the Department of Environment in March 2004. The Bangladesh Paribesh Andolan (BAPA), having reviewed the laws in a round table discussion, also suggested some modifications. Besides, the Noise Pollution Control Coordination Committee suggested its modifications in March 2004.

While we were waiting for the laws to be promulgated by the government, suddenly, the Minister-in-charge of the Ministry of Environment was changed and since then we have been in dark on the status of the laws.

Although Sunder Jiban and other fellow organizations including BAPA, Work for a Better Bangladesh, The Hunger Project, Hunger Free World and many others, individually or in collaboration with each other, have been putting in a lot of efforts to make people aware of the consequences of noise pollution, the government's effort to promulgate the laws is a must to bring our efforts to fruition.

We came to know from reliable sources that the draft laws are still waiting in the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs for vetting. As the end of the present government's tenure is imminent, we therefore urge them to take immediate and necessary actions to promulgate the laws before they step down, or else it will be hung up for an indefinite period of time and maybe it will never see the light of day.

Sunder Jiban is the general secretary of Air and Noise Pollution Control Programme (BAPA).

The green devolution

Indeed, when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called in January for a "second Green Revolution," his concern focused on raising farm incomes, not securing the food supply. He called for a fresh emphasis on fruits, vegetables and new plant varieties that would command higher prices in export markets. He also encouraged measures to harvest rainwater more efficiently, improve the soil and spread the benefits of agricultural technology, including genetically modified seeds.

JASON OVERDORF

THE Furnace Australia sailed into Chennai recently carrying a load of wheat and, some warned, ill tidings. India's first wheat imports in six years marked a reversal in the march toward "food independence" that the country began in the 1970s. To MS Swaminathan, one of the agronomists credited with sparking the so-called Green Revolution, the return of grain imports should be seen as "a wake-up call" for a country that has in recent years taken its ability to feed its people for granted.

Though India's government officially dismissed the return of grain imports as a passing event, Swaminathan and other experts saw it as the latest sign of a long-term decline. The growth rate of grain production has fallen from 1.5 percent before 1995 to 1 percent today, due to a combination of bad management, unpredictable weather and a growing water shortage. Meanwhile, the growth rate for all crops has fallen to 1.25 percent a year, the lowest level since India gained independence in 1947, says Ramesh Chand, acting director of India's National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research. That's too slow to keep pace with a population now growing, according to United Nations estimates, at a rate of 1.5 percent a year. Chand says the threat to India's food independence is manageable, if the government makes the right moves.

These are sobering indicators for the Green Revolution, which was originally inspired by grave threats to the food supply in India. After back-to-back droughts put the country in danger of massive starvation in 1966, a US presidential-advisory commission called for an "effort unprecedented in human history" to raise farm output around the world. And so it did, as scientists produced new strains of rice and wheat that boosted yields by a factor of five, with the help of heavy irrigation and applications of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. In India, an initially well-executed campaign raised grain output from 82 million metric tons in 1960 to 176 million tons in 1990 and cut imports to zero by 2000. That is, until the trend reversed.

Now production gains are slowing as the water supply dwindles, overzealous use of fertilizer and pesticides taints the soil and excessive irrigation waterlogs the land along canals in the showpiece states of India's Green Revolution, like the Punjab and Haryana.

Because irrigated land is two and a half times more productive than rain-fed land, many of the gains of the Green Revolution were produced by an increase in the area under irrigation. But as India's population and economy grow, water supplies are shrinking. Already, the World Bank estimates, India meets most of its irrigation and household demand by tapping groundwater -- a practice that is "no longer sustainable."

Similar threats haunt China and other developing nations that were big beneficiaries of the Green Revolution. China has responded by relaxing its commitment to being completely self-sufficient in the production of food -- encouraging farmers to grow more lucrative fruits and vegetables, while importing wheat and soybeans. To free-trade advocates, this approach makes sense -- why obsess over "food independence" in an increasingly global free market, if others grow wheat more efficiently than you do? Focus on the goods, agricultural or not, that you grow most efficiently.

Indeed, when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called in January for a "second Green Revolution," his concern focused on raising farm incomes, not securing the food supply. He called for a fresh emphasis on fruits, vegetables and new plant varieties that would command higher prices in export markets. He also encouraged measures to harvest rainwater more efficiently, improve the soil and spread the benefits of agricultural technology, including genetically modified seeds.

But the basic position of the Singh government is that India normally produces more grain than it consumes, and soon will again. As for the recent return to imports, officials dismissed it as a procurement snafu: this year, for the first time, India allowed private buyers, including multinationals, to buy wheat directly from farmers. That helped push up prices, and the government responded by refusing to match the prices offered by private buyers. It wound up buying less wheat than usual for the federal program that provides subsidized grain to 150 million poor Indians. When supplies fell short, the government had to turn to imports -- temporarily, officials insist.

Critics argue that Singh and his government are missing the big picture. Farm-policy analyst Devinder Sharma complains that "the people who govern this country believe technology is the answer to every problem," and are pushing a second revolution without examining why the first "has collapsed." Chand says the key going forward is to target backward states like Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, which have done little to modernize their farms, and thus have "huge potential" to reverse the slowdown in output.

One reason for these problems is that over the past decade India, as part of its effort to reduce the state role in the economy, has cut back significantly on investment in farms. Public-sector investment fell from just over 2 percent of agricultural output in 1991 to less than 1.5 percent in 2001. That slashed funds for upgrading Green Revolution technologies and for the extension programs that teach farmers how to make it all work.

By the late 1980s, when the early gains made in rice and wheat had slowed, India attempted to extend its success to pulses (peas and beans) and oilseeds. Though it did manage to produce high-yield seeds, the program failed to supply enough of these seeds to farmers, and poor oversight allowed corrupt traders to pass off ordinary seeds as high-yield hybrids, says Delhi University agricultural economist Usha Tuteja. With its vegetarian tradition India is the world's largest consumer of protein-rich pulses, but now ranks near the bottom in the production of these crops.

Swaminathan urges leaders to focus on what he calls an "ever-green revolution." The goal would be to correct the damage wrought by the first Green Revolution: adopting new methods like the use of natural predators instead of chemicals to eliminate pests, and switching to organic fertilizers and more efficient drip irrigation. He also says Singh should promote crops that require less water, including native Indian grains such as finger millet (ragi), pearl millet (bajra) and sorghum (jowar).

That's a tough sell for two reasons: these coarse grains, once a staple of regional Indian cuisines, have fallen out of style since the first Green Revolution made wheat cheap and plentiful. So restoring their popularity will take a major marketing push, of the kind governments rarely do well. Second, Singh sees India very differently from the critics, as a nation fighting to attain middle-class comfort, not one at risk of sliding into mass hunger. Watch the future voyages of the Furnace Australia, and whether it is carrying grain to India, for one strong sign of which view is right.

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