

Three cheers for our farmers

Our farmers are brave and defiant. They are optimistic. In every cropping season they gamble with their crops as none can say for sure whether the investment they have to make for raising crops would come back. Natural calamity like flood, drought, and other forms of extreme climatic situations, and pest attack or crisis of inputs may cause failure of their crops. No professionals, except the farmers, would enter into such uncertainties where the question of profit and loss exists.

NAZRUL ISLAM apprehension, speculating aman crop failure due to want of sufficient rains during the last monsoon. Aman paddy is almost a cent percent rain-fed crop, and therefore a more profitable crop than the other crops. Besides, aman crop requires less fertilizer and pesticide compared to other crops. But there was scanty rainfall during the full transplant season of aman paddy this year. The northern districts, which generally receive less rainfall than other parts of the country, this year received on an average 50 per cent rainfall and some districts like Dinajpur and Thakurgaon received less than 30 per cent rainfall compared to the normal precipitation. Under this situation, cultivation of aman

During my recent visit to the northern districts, I virtually got astonished seeing the lush green paddy fields. Staying in the capital, I myself wrote thousands of words of

our policy-makers. In fact, there is little contribution of the state to the agricultural production process in our country, although agriculture still constitutes nearly 25 per cent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Agriculture is still the single largest employment sector, offering jobs to over 50 per cent of the active labour force. Farmers of Bangladesh produce crops for their own survival. They do not think about their contribution to the national economy. But ultimately, farmers' contribution makes a great impact on the economy in terms of GDP and employment. The success of the farmers is their own. In case of crop failure, they have to starve and enter into the vicious cycle of land-mortgaging and money-lending for survival. The government or state machinery seldom comes forward to rescue them from the misery. Also, neither the government nor state

machinery plays a major role in making the production process hassle-free. Rather, every year, farmers have to undergo a great ordeal in getting fertilizer, electricity, diesel, and other inputs, which they buy in cash. The middlemen, supported by the government machinery, push them into misery, creating artificial crisis of inputs to derive extra profit. The people who are sitting at the helm of policy-making neither calculate the farming community's requirement of inputs nor do they take necessary steps to procure those in time. As a result, every year a huge sum of money is being siphoned off from the pockets of the poor farmers to the henchmen of the ruling party. Our farmers are brave and defiant. They are optimistic. In every cropping season they gamble with their crops as none can say for sure whether the investment they have to make for raising crops would come back.

Nazrul Islam is a journalist, agriculturist, and environmentalist.



The new arithmetic: 1+1= -53

Many possibilities. But two things we see today are certain. Firstly the eventual masters of our destiny will be the ones who speak and believe in the language of hope. Secondly, the politics of the next six months are going to be crucial in deciding what the long-term future of each of the political parties is going to be. We are indeed looking at a new arithmetic. Let us now hope that our leaders can add.

NAZIM FARHAN CHOUDHURY

BASIC principle of democracy is the right to choose. Our vote is an indication of who we want to represent us in the Parliament and hence in the decision process that governs our life. The biggest learning that I have taken out of Mr Nazim Kamran Choudhury's recent article (The Daily Star, October 6) is that the vote bases of all our major (and not so major) political parties have eroded to an extent that "undecided" voters account for up to 53% of the electorate. This figure is apparently reflected in many such opinion polls. For the first time in Bangladesh's young democratic life, we are heading into a poll that in theory is going to be decided in the polling booths. It does not take a political pundit to analyse the rational behind this phenomenon. We, the voters, have lost all faith in our politicians. The current leadership, which have been, pretty much ruling the roost for the last four decades have allowed their parties to become bankrupt of political ideology. To a common voter, neither party offers any clear-cut choice. Hence, while BNP has lost this support base so has the Awami League. So when the majority of Bangladesh's electorate step into the polling booth next, the choice will be, as far as they are concerned, between the lesser of two evils. As Mr Choudhury predicts, AL might come out on top with a very clear mandate indeed. One, however, fears that they will interpret this victory as an indication of support for their politics. Far from it. The result will only be a clarion call of people's anger with the incumbent's notoriously inept handling of governance and the economy. The voters are not saying that AL will be better masters, rather that BNP will not. I am an advertising practitioner. In my job it is paramount for us to find out the unique positioning for my product, making it stand out to the consumer. I cannot think of any brand that has been successful in marketing itself by saying: "You have no other choice but to use me!" AL seems hell bent in doing just that. Since being sent to Jatiya Sangsad with an increased vote base in 2001, they have not played the role of a constructive opposition. If we are to look at their policy in the last five years, it has been mostly based on removing a democratically elected government through street protests. Can anyone tell me what has their policy stand been on education, IT, tax ombudsman, environment, FDI, or anything, other than misguided notion that BNP party has no legitimacy to rule? In a parliamentary democracy, the role of the opposition is to be that of a government in waiting. Their shadow cabinet's main job is to critique (as opposed to only criticise) the Treasury bench. They are to match policy to policy, statement to statement, and paper to paper the government on all fronts. AL has failed in that job. Now I am not at all saying the government has been remotely capable of handling their responsibilities. But come election, how do I judge which box to put my seal on? Ideologically, conventional wisdom says that AL is left of centre in its political belief. And that BNP is right leaning. However, if you are to analyse the manifestoes of the two parties, it would be difficult to decipher any difference between the two. If you are to look at the speeches of the leadership of the two parties when they are not spilling venom against their bitter rivals, you will see an uncanny similarity in their thought process. AL today has been given a historic chance. Given the fact that 10 million more people will come into suffrage by next elections, AL's mistakes of mid-70s are no longer a deciding factor in voting for (or against) them. The slate has been wiped clean. If AL can show maturity, if they can show that they actually have sound political motives, if they can show they have a positive role to play in our future, the mandate that they get when the election results are announced will give them the foundation to rule the nation into the foreseeable future.



There is as always another way of looking at the "new arithmetic" that Mr Choudhury wrote about. In advertising, we always look out for a consumer need-gap that can be filled. Many brands have been extremely successful exploiting this demand by tailoring their message to suit this need. Our political arena offers such an opportunity. We have lost faith with the two brand leaders. We do not believe in their message. Look at it this way: say if the leading brand of shirt is no different from the second brand, and if both the shirt brands are talking about fashion while their buyers want comfort. Then is it not the perfect time for a third brand to come in and say: We are the most comfortable brand? What I am getting to is that the field is wide open for a third party to emerge to fill the void left by our current political parties. So who will bell this cat? Let us look at our usual suspects: **Jatiya Party and General Ershad:** JP's vote bank has, according to Mr Choudhury's survey, reduced from 7 percent to only 4 percent. They have become a regional party without the political capital to become a phoenix. **Jamaat:** JI too has been reduced to oblivion. Mr Choudhury predicts but one seat in the next elections to

them. It seems the party is caught between a rock and a hard place. Their fundamentalist vote bank is abandoning them for the far right Islamist movements like JMB, while at the same time they are failing to attract the mass voters because of this extreme image that they have. **Bikalpa Dhara/Gono Forum:** Bikalpa Dhara showed initial promise. In their first set of posters that they printed, they had both Sheikh Mujib and Ziaur Rahman on the same page. But since then it has been downhill. They have not been successful in making themselves noticed outside the diplomatic belt of Gulshan and Baridhara (and of course Munshiganj). Gono Forum, which was to AL, what Bikalpa Dhara is to BNP, has failed to even win a single seat they have so far contested. In 1996 election, their leader, the much-respected Dr Kamal Hossain lost his deposit from an "intellectually enlightened" constituency like Dhanmondi. And now on top of all this, they have strategically aligned themselves to the AL and hence in the eyes of the voter have blended in with their more stronger partner. **Oli Ahmed:** Does anyone still doubt if Col Oli will bolt from the BNP once the caretaker government takes oath? It is believed that he will take with him a sizeable number of dissident BNP leaders. Mostly they will be the old guards who have lost all their standing under the rising influence of the Young Turks of Hawa Bhaban. Col Oli and his merry men have the distinct possibility of becoming king-makers in the next parliament. But they have to play their cards just right. A lot depends on how many seats they can get for themselves through a tactical alliance with the AL. **The "New" BNP:** Let us say we are now in middle of first quarter of 2007. Elections in Bangladesh have taken place and as predicted by Mr Choudhury, BNP has between 60 and 70 seats in Jatiya Sangsad. Most of its leadership, having either lost the elections or having defected, is in disarray. The new AL government moves with vengeance to prosecute the reported corruption of the current young leadership. The party will be ripe for the taking. If Begum Zia has even a fraction of political acumen, she will allow new "clean" leadership to replace the stooges of dubious moral standing being currently promoted by her son. Many from the pro-business caucus find BNP more attuned to their needs than the AL and may flock to a re-emerging BNP. Once purged of corrupt self-serving overlords, the party can get back to re-energising its base. Rajiv Gandhi successfully did something similar with the Bofor's scandal-hit Congress Party in India after its disgraceful loss to VP Singh. **The "New" AL:** Like in BNP, AL too has seen a power struggle between the young and old guards. I am not a betting man. Otherwise my money would be on Saber Hossain Choudhury and him bringing in the Chattrra and Jubo League under his belt. And use this as a base to fire up the new entrants to our voter rolls. Let us hope good sense prevails and from the midst of the negativity that is everywhere now, they become the harbinger of positive politics. **Generation 71:** The average age in Bangladesh is 21. Vast majority of our population were born post-1971. Sheikh Mujib, Generals Zia and Ershad, and all their politics, do not mean much to us. While they

have their rightful place in our history, we look at our leaders to bridge us to the future and not be lost in our past. Many of us are well educated with degrees from the best institutes of learning from across the world. We see a dream of a strong Bangladesh. We see the hope of a successful Bangladesh. We believe in the promise of a prosperous Bangladesh. I will not be surprised if we soon say enough is bloody enough, it is now our turn to rule. You only need to talk to anyone under the age of 40 today to see that not only does this generation of leaders march to a different beat; they have decided to take altogether a different route to Bangladesh's future. Many possibilities. But two things we see today are certain. Firstly the eventual masters of our destiny will be the ones who speak and believe in the language of hope. Secondly, the politics of the next six months are going to be crucial in deciding what the long-term future of each of the political parties is going to be. We are indeed looking at a new arithmetic. Let us now hope that our leaders can add.

Nazim Farhan Choudhury is an advertising executive and freelance columnist.

Biman: An insider's view

By legislation Biman does not, in effect, have a say in its own management. It runs on the will and whim of the government. By legislation it is a welfare organization. Whether it should make profit or run as a charitable organization is up to the government. Only in recent times has it become apparent to us that there is an obvious plan to choke Biman to death, leaving 5,500 of its employees jobless. It must be understood that the corporation will now demand full freedom in the planning and the running of the corporation, since the government has lost its credibility as far as Biman is concerned.

CAPTAIN AM MAQSOOD AHMED

SO often it is said that state-owned companies do not make profit. It is needless to say that to the people who are given the sacred responsibilities to run these projects these are avenues to milk the system for personal gains. This has happened with the banks, PDB, water board, BR, BRTC, BIWTC, and many other state-owned corporations. The same is happening with Biman, the only difference being this is a company that is facing impending collapse. While the other losing concerns are kept afloat, why is it that the government is doing everything

possible to see the last of the national flag carrier? Because this organization once served the purpose of the vested quarters when it was alive and well, now it will serve them better if it is killed off. After all, the airline business is one of the most lucrative businesses these days, and with Biman around, others don't stand a chance. Biman does not make profit. How do we voice our right to exist? Simple. We do not run this corporation, the government does. Historically, the people who were at the helm of its management were exploiting Biman. It goes way back to the era when the F-27s and the 707s were sold right after total refurbishment and with a

huge amount of spares to go with them. It is believed that the perpetrators made millions of dollars in the deal. When the ATPs were purchased, we only expressed our opinion that it was not a good idea to buy them. The Airbus were bought at an inflated price, we could not care less because it was not our duty to police the government. When the 737s were leased unnecessarily, we voiced our disapproval. But when the junk F-28s were purchased, we protested in disgust, because not only it endangered the lives of our valued passengers, it threatened our own safety maybe a few hundred times more. Then the DC-10s and Airbus-310s were leased

at a rate the skeptics say would be adequate for lease-cum-purchase, meaning, by this time we should own them with the money we paid for them. In late 2003, Biman board of directors approved purchase of four Boeing 777s and six Airbus 330s. We were jubilant because we thought that this decision would make up for the feeling of being let down by the government following 9/11. Big airlines were struggling for survival, their modern aircrafts stranded all around the globe. These aircrafts were ours for the taking at minimal price, because they had to count parking charge for each one of them. At that time, Biman was flying high, with virtually no terror threat, with all the right reasons to go for the planned expansion of routes and further. But we could not impress the policy makers. We had the leased 737s and 310s, on top of that, we were made to purchase the F-28s, which were not airworthy at the time of purchase. But we failed to seize the opportunity to own modern aircraft like the 777s, 767s, or the Airbus. Instead, we were forced to take in the junk called F-28 (the Biman press release actually termed them "ultramodern F-28"). With Biman board approving the

purchase of ten new aircrafts, we thought that our frustration was adequately addressed. But the finance minister rejected the proposal in the Ecneq meeting in spite of the fact that the government had a very small financial involvement in the deal. A few days after that, the finance minister in a statement said that the Biman aircrafts are too old and they need replacing. After that the whole idea went underground for unexplained reasons. The 777s were offered at a price of approximately \$123 million each and the 330s at around \$100 million each. These aircrafts were supposed to be delivered around this time, and today the price of the 777s stand at \$235 million each while the price of the 330s at \$190 million each. Simple math says that one decision by the finance minister has cost Biman a total of \$988 million! Today we are begging to salvage Biman with a meager allocation of Tk 1,800 crore. What does Biman get? Biman gets Tk 150 crore and advice to cut down losses. It is another way of saying: "Count your losses and start packing, you are out of business." With the existing equipment that we have, Biman can survive like a patient in coma, only with the help of life support

equipment. By legislation Biman does not, in effect, have a say in its own management. It runs on the will and whim of the government. By legislation it is a welfare organization. Whether it should make profit or run as a charitable organization is up to the government. Only in recent times has it become apparent to us that there is an obvious plan to choke Biman to death, leaving 5,500 of its employees jobless. We can either sit back and watch the slow and painful death of Biman or resist this evil plan. It must be understood that the corporation will now demand full freedom in the planning and the running of the corporation, since the government has lost its credibility as far as Biman is concerned. Other than Biman, all the state-owned airlines are thriving in the expanding travel market. We were not allowed to take our share of the booming market. Dhaka itself is one of the most lucrative destinations for all the airlines operating in the region. We have seen new airlines opening up operation at Dhaka while the old ones have doubled or tripled their frequency. All this time we had to watch others prosper with our government's help, while we had to shrink our operation due to non-cooperation by the government and lack of planning. Starting an airline is not as easy as opening a satellite TV channel. You cannot remove a national flag carrier from the screen by merely pressing a button on your remote. With us around, others will have "away-field" disadvantage. Probably that is the reason that some would like to kill this organization off. Now that we aim to stand up for our rights, we might as well understand our priorities and how to go about attaining them. We shall have to get rid of the corruption, and seal the loopholes that lead to corruption (this process is already underway and significant ground made). Get our heads down into serious market study. Revive the fleet structure approved by the Biman board of directors but rejected by Ecneq. (Of course it has to be updated with the present scenario because those aircrafts will be out dated by the time we get them delivered, we should be contemplating Boeing-787s and Airbus 350s!). Overhaul our management system, if required appoint specialist consultants. We shall have to ask the suppliers/manufacturers for interim operation of the airline with viable aircrafts on lease basis, till the time we get delivery of the new aircrafts. These are decisions that cannot wait. Injecting money in small amounts may keep it alive for the time being, but we should be looking for means to sustain on our own. Leasing or purchasing old aircraft will pull us down to the same abyss time and again that we are already in. If the paperwork and the deals are not done before the caretaker government takes over, I doubt the survival of this organization, since the caretaker government will not take responsibility for the organization left alone to die by an elected government.