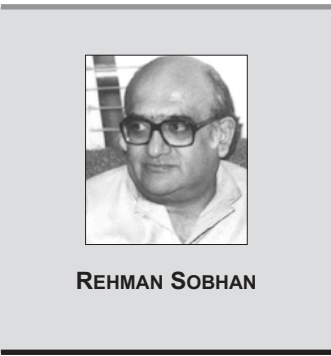


Restoring faith in the democratic process



REHMAN SOBHAN

WE meet at a very critical moment in the nation's history. On the previous occasions where I have presented such reports the moment held much promise. In March 1991, when as a member of the first caretaker government, I presented the report on 29 task forces set up by me, to the then president of Bangladesh, Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, the nation was consumed with optimism for the future.

In August 2001, when we presented the reports of 15 task forces convened by CPD again, by coincidence, to President Shahabuddin Ahmed, and also to Mr. Mannan Bhuiyan and the late SAMS Kibria, this optimism had been somewhat diminished through exposure to a decade of confrontational politics and a dysfunctional parliament. But the mood was still positive, if more subdued. Today, as we stand poised on the edge of a dark void which could devour our democratic institutions, the public mood is one of foreboding.

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The chief adviser enjoyed universal credibility, and chose to take all his decisions through a process of democratic consultation with his colleagues in the advisory council. Whilst controversy over the role of the caretaker government may have been generated in the wake of the elections, particularly in 2001, during the actual tenure of the three governments, no such challenge to the legitimacy of the caretaker government prevailed.

Today, for the first time, the conduct of the caretaker government itself has become a source of controversy, with the non-partisan character of its chief executive being questioned. Even though members of the current advisory council are playing a commendably constructive role

under the most trying circumstances, we are witness to contradictions between the chief advisor and his colleagues, which were not witnessed in any of the three previous caretaker governments. The credibility of the present Election Commission, from the outset of its incumbency, has come under challenge to an extent not seen during the course of the last three elections, and the very scheduling of the elections is now contested.

Some very dramatic changes in the current situation are demanded if the caretaker government is to establish sufficient authority to preside over a credible election. The conduct of the chief advisor needs to be more transparent, the functioning of the advisory council more democratic, the integrity of the Election Commission must be restored and, above all, the conduct of the major political parties has to be less confrontational. Otherwise we may end up with confrontation instead of elections, or with an election which commands a diminished credibility in the eyes of the electorate as well as the international community. Either of these outcomes would compromise the legitimacy of whichever

government holds office in the days ahead, which would neither serve the cause of democracy nor restore tranquility to Bangladesh.

In such circumstances, as voters and citizens, we look to our political parties to step back from the brink and make a final effort to restore the credibility and authority of the caretaker government by restoring the autonomy of the office of the chief advisor. We need to reestablish the credibility of the Election Commission, so that a greater sense of urgency can be invested in the task of publishing a credible voter's list. Such a process may usefully reach out to civil society organizations with links to the grassroots to augment the resources of the Election Commission in the task of expediting the preparation of a comprehensive and transparent voter's roll.

Once the right to vote, and vote only once, has been established we need to ensure that no person is denied this right through direct coercion or threats of force. Here we will need to ensure that the officials who conduct the election, enforce law and order and eventually count the votes, are untainted by partisan commitments. In this task of establishing the integrity of

the voting process civil society must also mobilize itself across the nation and go out before, during and after the elections to ensure as well as protect their right to vote, and to reassure those who are particularly endangered from exercising their franchise.

The establishment of an enabling environment for free and fair elections remains an immediate priority. But it is just the first stage of an election process. The demand for clean candidates, associated neither with acts of violence or command over sizeable undeclared wealth, is widespread. The Nagorik Committee, and every civil society group which has sounded out public opinion across the country can testify to the universal nature of the public demand for the political parties to nominate credible candidates for the forthcoming election.

In this task it is not enough to make demands on the parties to reach out to party workers of longstanding commitment with a record of public service, and to prioritize such candidates in preference to those with deep pockets and adequate firepower at their disposal. Voters must demonstrate their preference for clean candidates by actually voting for such candidates when offered such a choice by a political party. It is for citizens, as voters, to reassure the political leaders that they will not be sacrificing a seat by nominating a clean candidate in preference to one with muscle and money.

If we move to a free and fair election, contested by candidates held in some public esteem who have participated in an electoral process whose outcome is beyond challenge, we will also need to ensure that the democratic mandate of the parliament is restored. Three successive parliaments have failed to discharge their electoral mandate to hold the state accountable, or to give voice to the mounting concerns of the voters. The people of Bangladesh seek corruption free and effective governance which will assure them uncompromised justice, non-partisan law enforcement, adequate food, remunerative work, access to regular power supply, clean water, decent schools and well functioning health care facilities. It is the responsibility of our parliament to ensure such a process of governance through creative legislation, as well as to keep the government constantly accountable and fully transparent.

Bangladesh cannot afford to live through yet another dysfunctional parliament characterized by boycotts, exchange of invectives and indifference to burning public concerns. A fourth such parliament could reflect a terminal sickness in a vital institution of democracy from which it may be difficult to recover. With our administration and law enforcement agencies compromised by corruption and partisan conduct and our judiciary moving into a phase of partisan warfare, virtually all the major organs of governance are approaching melt-

down.

The crisis of governance facing Bangladesh is particularly tragic because there are many areas of light which punctuate the darkness. Our hardworking farmers have tripled food production. Two million women from our rural areas, as well as other workers employed by a class of promising entrepreneurs, have given Bangladesh a globally competitive export capacity. Millions of ordinary people, mostly from the rural areas, are working abroad to remit over \$5 billion which has sustained our balance of payments far more effectively than our declining inflows of foreign aid. Near to 20 million, mostly poor women, use access to micro-credit to sustain their families and prevent them from sinking deeper into poverty. Large numbers of unrecognized individuals or groups have worked in a variety of innovative ways to ensure subsistence for their families, or resources for the local community. Many young men and women, whether working in the professions or through civil society organizations, have demonstrated commitment and professional skills which have enhanced our development capacity.

If faith in the democratic process is to be restored such constituencies of promise deserve to be presented with a vision for the future. Such a vision will serve to aggregate these various enclaves of activity within a national project which inspires hope that Bangladesh can, one day, come together to synergise its enor-

mous potential. The initiative of the Nagorik Committee was designed to reach out to citizens around the country to capture this sense of expectation for the future. We have attempted to build upon Bangladesh's successes in a variety of areas so as to design a vision which draws upon the potential inherent in us to transform Bangladesh into a poverty free, democratic and inclusive society.

Our expectation is that our political leaders will share this vision and draw upon many of our ideas in designing their own agenda for transforming Bangladesh. Any such vision originating from civil society can only graduate into an implementable agenda by encouraging the political parties to invest their political authority behind a vision for the future, which they can transmit to the people through the democratic process.

Sustainable democracy demands political parties who can project a vision of hope to the people of Bangladesh. Such a vision should not be perceived as yet another exercise in campaign rhetoric or it will only perpetuate cynicism from a public who have grown weary of broken election promises. The political leadership must demonstrate their credibility, as well as capacity, to implement such a vision, and the statesmanship to reach out to civil society to join them in the task of transforming such a vision into reality.

Rehaman Sobhan is Chairman, CPD and Convenor, Nagorik Committee 2006

Why do birds sing



ROKIA AFZAL RAHMAN

WHY do birds sing? Poets and lovers have long spoken of the vocal passion expressed in every garden and park, but only recently have scientists begun to study these songs. One such person is Professor Timothy DeVoogd of Cornell University (New York). For more than 25 years he has studied the biology of song in songbirds. Over this time he and his students have designed a variety of experiments to try to discover how the brains of these tiny birds hear, learn and finally produce a song that not only charms female birds, but can win our hearts as well.

One early discovery was that there are several tiny areas within the brain that are dedicated to singing. These regions are much larger in males (who typically do all, or most, of the singing) than in females. They are larger in bird species like the shaliks, that learn elaborate songs, than in birds like sparrows that can only learn a simple song. And within a species like the doel (Magpie Robin) these brain regions are larger during the seasons in which the birds are singing than in the other seasons.

How does this happen? Step by step, Dr. DeVoogd and other biologists are putting answers together. In baby birds these song production areas are alike in males and females. However, brain cells in these areas die in young females, thereby creating a difference in song production areas that will remain part of their brains throughout their lives. When a young male is one or two months old he listens to the songs of his father and of other adult males and memorizes many of the sounds that he hears. Later, he begins to put together his own songs using these notes. In males of most species this is the song that he sings every spring as he tries to attract a female, or warns other males to stay away. A female, in turn, listens to these songs. In many species a

female compares the songs of different males and chooses to pair and mate with the one whose song is most attractive. Often, it is the male who has learned the most and has the stamina to keep singing and singing. As females keep choosing males with the best songs, and generation follows generation, gradually the males sing better and better songs -- the influence of genetics coupled with enhanced learning -- until, ultimately, the males not only thrill the females but enchant us as well.

How does the brain carry out these tasks? Nerve cells or neurons bring information to the brain, carry information from one part of the brain to another, and carry the signals that instruct muscles to move. Dr. DeVoogd and colleagues have found that each of the events above is caused by changes in neurons or their connections (synapses). If males are raised by females and never hear or learn a song neurons in a major song production area only grow about 80% of their normal quota of synapses. In adult males the male hormone testosterone rises in the spring. It makes the males interested in mating, and also causes neurons throughout the song production areas to grow many more synapses that are then lost when the breeding season is over.

Parallel changes happen in the brains of females. If they are raised without hearing a song they are not able to distinguish between good and poor songs as adults, and they have fewer synapses in the brain area used for song perception. Thus, learning creates synapses and these novel connections between neurons encode the learning and allow males and females to express it, each in his or her own way. Birds from species with more elaborate songs have more neurons in these areas to begin with, and so can form many more patterns of connections between the neurons than is possible in birds that only sing simple songs. The beauty of the biology inside the head matches the beauty of the behaviour.

Rokia Afzal Rahman is Chairman, The Daily Star.

MUHAMMED AZIZ KHAN

Bangladesh without loadshedding will attain double digit growth. Bangladesh is endowed with ample resource of natural gas, the feed stock for clean, efficient generation of electricity. Bangladesh is almost a square country of 57000 sq. miles with plain alluvial land, and a high population density of 928 people per kilometer, thus providing electricity customers almost everywhere. This makes transmission and distribution of electricity fairly easy and cost effective. Further, the country has a very effective "Private Sector Power Generation Policy" providing total tax exemption and 100% foreign currency convertibility and repatriation. The government of Bangladesh (GOB) also guarantees the effectiveness of Land Lease Agreement (LLA), Gas Supply Agreement (GSA), Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) through an implementation Agreement (IA). Bangladesh is a developing country with 137 million people, a GDP growth of 6.7% (Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, National Accounts Statistics, May 2006) in fiscal year 2006, and a huge demand and supply gap of electricity.

With a current demand of about 5000 m.w., the national grid can reliably only supply about 3000 m.w., resulting in shortage of about 2000 m.w. during peak period. It is estimated that the demand is growing at 10% per annum. Considering the above circumstances, the generation of electricity should not be a challenge in Bangladesh. However, between 2001 to 2006, GOB has added only about 200 m.w. of new generation capacity, creating this huge demand supply gap. The Power System Master Plan, authored by Acres International Limited, expects that base load demand of electricity will be around 7000 m.w. by 2011. It is expected that about 600 m.w. of present generation capacity will be redundant due to old age. Keeping in mind at least a 20% reserve margin for a stable grid, the additional capacity required by 2011 is 5000 m.w.

Adding 5000 m.w. would require about \$3.5 billion i.e. about Taka 24,500 crore, the optimal cost effective solution would be seven 700 m.w. high efficiency combined cycle natural gas fired power plants. These plants may be built in Meghnaghat (Dhaka) 2X700 m.w., Sirajganj 1X700 m.w., Sylhet 1X700 m.w., Mymensingh 1X700 m.w. and Bheramara 2X 700 m.w. with 50% export to India, (this will require gas connection to Bheramara), Khulna 1X700 m.w. (this will require gas connection to Khulna). In each of these places a river is available, a necessity for combined cycle power plants. However, in Bheramara there might be shortage of water. One of the solutions for this may be to sell 700 m.w. of electricity to India, thereby

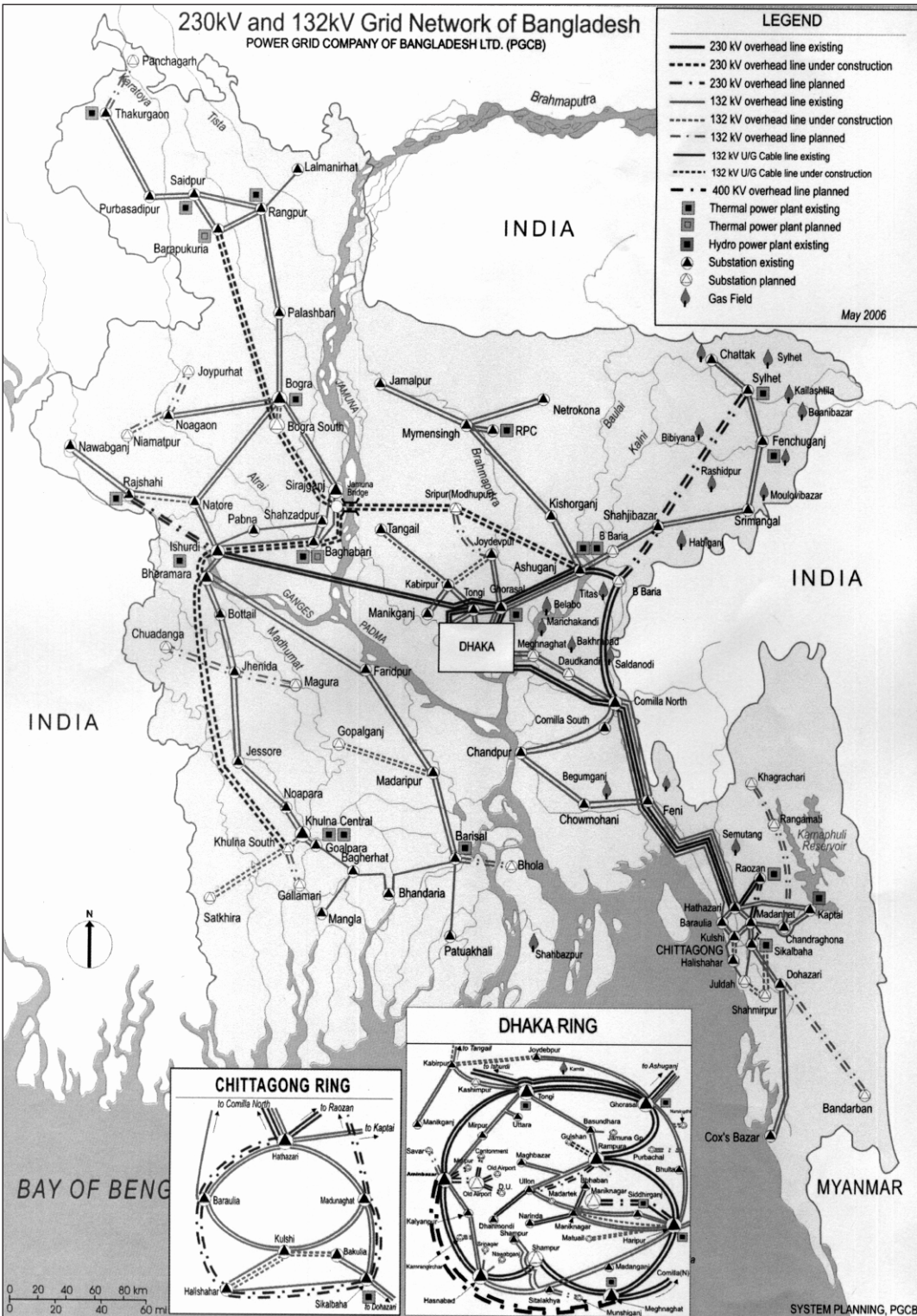
making India a stakeholder in the Bheramara power plant.

Although the task of adding 5000 m.w. may seem challenging, it is indeed possible. Moreover, this will enable Bangladesh to have double digit growth, and alleviate poverty. As mentioned above, Bangladesh has the right policy, feed stock, natural gas as well as demand, backed by purchasing power.

Natural Gas: We need to continue to invest in exploration, production and transmission. Fortunately, this is already taking place and will accelerate as the exploration and production (E&P) companies realise the demand for the gas emanating from the electricity sector. Each of the E&P companies assured the author that there is enough gas for these plants to run for 25 years, and they are very eager to increase capacity. In fact, E&P companies will be able to double the capacity in two years, from the present 1400 mmcf to 2800 mmcf. However, the additional gas required for 5600 m.w. is 115 mmcf. Of course the gas pipe line network must be extended to western Bangladesh, including Bheramara and Khulna. Gas has already gone to Sirajganj and Bogra. It is only right that the western parts of Bangladesh should also receive the huge benefits stemming out of Bangladesh having clean fuel like natural gas. Fortunately, this is already planned, and action is being taken by the GOB through Gas Transmission Company Ltd (GTCL) and WESTGAS.

Electricity Transmission lines need to be upgraded. This has been taking place over the last five years and, therefore, would not be a major obstacle. Similarly, distribution of electricity has also expanded in the last five years, probably more than could be used, resulting in the Kansat debacle where lives were lost demanding electricity in already electricity connected homes, industries and pumps.

The Funds necessary, i.e. about \$3.5 billion will be invested by national and multinational companies, stock market for equity and for debt commercial banks, development banks, export credit and multilateral agencies. The author has been privileged to discuss the financing issues with global giants in the power sector, as well as debt providers, and feels confident that the investment of \$3.5 billion in the power market of Bangladesh, over five years, can be achieved without much difficulty. The goal of all investment, equity and debt, is to receive a fair return at a reasonably low risk. Bangladesh power sector provides these through demand of electricity vis a vis cost of electricity. An efficient combined cycle plant as envisaged in a 700m.w power plant would be about 55% efficient, i.e. produce 56 units of electricity from 100 units of natural gas. If such a plant is utilised at 85% load with gas price at \$1.20 mmbtu, as charged to BPDB, it would result in a cost of approxi-



mately Tk 1.80 per kw resulting in substantial profit for BPDB, or electricity off -taker, at the same time providing reasonable profit to the electricity generator.

The Electricity System can be further improved with control of system loss and theft. This has already improved from about 40% in 1997 to about 25% in 2005. The GOB should make electricity theft a criminal offence rather than a civil offence. The only recourse available to the distributors as per the present system in the disconnection of electricity lines. This is inadequate in the context of political realities and musclemanship of local politicians, who usually are beneficiaries of theft, along with illegal employees of electricity distribution companies.

The only difficult reality is that GOB must also increase electricity tariff taking into consideration the increased cost of all products and

services. The consumers of electricity would be recipients of a more continuous supply of electricity, along with the required voltage, if they discourage theft and accept reasonable tariff increase.

Bangladesh is further fortunate to find substantial good quality coal deposits in the north- western part of the country. This coal must be harnessed in the most efficient manner. To that end GOB should form a far-reaching "Coal Policy." The policy should include electricity generation from coal. However, this method of electricity generation will take time as coal mine development, production of substantial amount of coal, and setting up power plants thereafter will not be possible before 2012. Of course, all the oil based power plants should be closed, or converted, and connected to gas for gas based operation as soon as possible. Finally, I will take this opportunity to mention that I strongly believe that

all land transport should immediately be required to convert and use Compressed Natural Gas (CNG). This alone would save the country huge foreign exchange spent on imported petroleum products.

Bangladesh is geographically near two of the most well-performing countries of the world, China and India. We have similar resources and conditions as those countries. In fact, in Bangladesh with the availability of her own natural gas, and the more recently discovered coal, and having a homogenous people, given electricity, the most important physical infrastructure for development, Bangladesh will certainly achieve double digit growth.

Muhammed Aziz Khan is Chairman, Summit Group of Companies.