

Jute sector in dire straits

The government must set it right

HERE is hardly any question that Bangladesh's jute sector has over the years declined from a state of the sublime to one of the ridiculous. The facts speak for themselves. In the period immediately following liberation, the number of workers in the jute mills totalled 250,000. Today, full time as well as part time workers make up a figure of just 45,000. Of a total of 77 jute mills, the government is interested in managing only 14 mills. When it comes to the issue of a purchase of jute, the target of the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation in the last financial year was 260,000 metric tonnes. In actuality, it was able to procure only 125,000 metric tonnes, jute acreage having shrunk considerably. Overall, the picture in the jute sector has not exactly been an edifying one.

The shutdown of jute mills, beginning with Adamjee in 2002, has gone on unabated, with the result that thousands of workers and their families have been pushed into a state of uncertainty. While that is the reality in Bangladesh, the situation is precisely the reverse in India, where a spate of jute mills establishment has been going on for the past several years. That is the irony for Bangladesh. From having been a premier jute producing country, in the global sense of the term, it now has an apology of a jute industry. The fine jute and jute products that Bangladesh once produced have depressingly been supplanted by products of suspect quality. Jute does not need to be in such a state since a rise in oil prices has led to a pushing up of the cost of synthetic production. Besides, synthetics are also increasingly being regarded as environment-unfriendly. As a result, there has been a trend back toward a use of natural fibres, a situation that India through its jute mills has clearly taken advantage of. We in Bangladesh in similar manner should seize the opportunity to rebuild our jute industry.

The present government, in our view, is well placed to cause a rejuvenation in the jute sector through a formulation of credible programmes regarding jute development. That calls for a return to the production of quality jute, diversification of jute products and a purposeful marketing campaign towards promoting them globally. We have heard about a national committee on jute being formed. We will urge the committee to energetically pursue its terms of reference and come up with a diagnostic report on the state of the sector and what can be done to have it make a turnaround. Meanwhile, let a meaningful dialogue be conducted in the public domain between all stakeholders on the issue. Jute certainly calls for some hard rethinking on our part.

Electoral preparations

Need to accelerate the process

PREPARATION of the electoral roll and finalisation of the electoral reform must be high on the agenda of the Election Commission.

Interestingly, the character of the electoral reform being talked about by the election commission (EC) and the tone of the discussion on reforms articulated by the political parties, as well as those that they had expressed through their manifestoes before the election of 2001, bear strong similarities. In fact there is a strong convergence on the issue among the major stake holders.

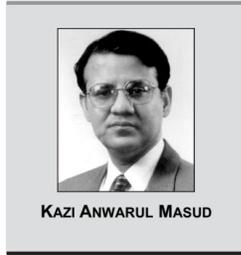
That being the case, where a national consensus, albeit unannounced, on political and electoral reform, exists, we feel that it sets the scene very well to formalise the necessary changes. In fact it augurs very well for the future talks between the political parties and EC since these can start from a point of advantage. Nobody can contest the need for an early dialogue between the political parties and the commission since it is essential that the opinions regarding reform are harmonised, put in a coherent form and adopted.

It therefore stands to reason that the nation would be keen to see any hiccup to the road to future dialogue removed. And we repeat what we have said in the past, that the ban on indoor politics ought to be lifted to facilitate dialogue.

The other issue that deserves equal attention, if not more, is the matter of the voter list. We feel that there is lot of merit in what the BNP secretary general has suggested regarding the need to move full throttle on the electoral roll preparation in order that the road map could be adhered to. We get the impression that there are snags that are still dogging the process of initiating the move to finalise the list in the manner that have been expressed by the EC i.e., with photographs. The snags that have been identified in the procedures, as exposed in the Stripur exercise, must be done away with. It must also be iterated that the process of acquiring appropriate equipment cannot brook any delay.

It is for all concerned to ensure that the process for holding a free and fair election is accelerated.

Bangladesh's road to democracy



KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

CURRENTLY, Bangladesh is being pressurised by both internal and external forces to hold a parliamentary election soonest possible. It is their combined judgment that unless a government is formed according to the will of the people, the actions that would continue to be taken for an extended period by the present interim government would lack legitimacy.

Perhaps the real fear of the stake-holders is that the government would hesitate to take responsibility should it fail to control the rising prices of essentials, particularly after the considerable damage to crops and vegetables caused by the flood.

Bangladesh needs developmental democracy that would embrace not only the foundational values of democracy, but, at the same time, ensure economic development of the country.

Doubts, however, exist in the minds of some as to whether Bangladeshis are equipped well enough to call the elected government to account, should it appear to stray from the path of good governance.

Political sociologist S.M. Lipset (Political Man, 1960) suggests that democratic political develop-

ment is dependent upon a combination of economic, social, and cultural requisites that are unlikely to exist in countries with underdeveloped economies.

It is also argued that democracy is culturally rooted and the people of the country must have the desire to have democracy, which can only be promoted from outside but not imposed.

Given the authoritarian history of the broader Middle East and some parts of Africa, sceptics would like to cite historian Bernard Lewis's observation that democracy is peculiarly a Western concept, devised to conduct public affairs, that may or may not be suitable for others.

Though Lewis arrogantly presumed that democracy could be comprehended by the Westerners only, he perhaps forgot that Europe for centuries had no democratic institutions, and that the worst forms of authoritarianism, nazism and fascism, had sprung from Europe, albeit they were defeated by the Westerners themselves.

His assumption that the root cause of Muslim anger comes from having been defeated by "an inferior religion" -- Christianity -- is

misplaced. But Bernard Lewis says that Christianity's scriptural directive to "render ... unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's" as distinct from Islam's, for example, could be seen as one of the reasons of democracy deficit in Muslim countries.

Because Muslims believe that sovereignty resides in God and not in the people, a fundamental principle of democracy is denied by refusing to differentiate between temporal and spiritual powers.

But then, one has to admit that Christianity was born in adversity and was persecuted for centuries by the then rulers of the world, while Prophet Mohammed saw in his lifetime the victory of Islam in Arabia within a short time. In other words, unlike Christianity, Islam did not have a prolonged history of persecution.

Coincidentally, Islam prospered in tribal societies where democratic accountability in the form of accountability of the rulers to the ruled is rare, and if at all one did find accountability it would be

constitutional accountability in the form of accounting for actions by office holders to one another; or

an oligopolistic system in practice.

This could bring one to Samuel Huntington's hypothesis: "That the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great division among the human kind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations."

Given Huntington's definition of civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes human from other species," some have interpreted one strand of terrorism in religious-civilisational terms, particularly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as acts having been perpetrated by Islamic extremists that have produced fear and consequent bias against Muslims in the Western world.

Admittedly, the US pressure on Hosni Mubarak had resulted in a multiple race for the presidency for the first time in Egypt, but a significant part of the US estab-

lishment has turned anti-Saudi Arabia, a staunch US ally in the Middle East, due to its adherence to Wahabism, a purist strand of Islam, and the Saudi refusal to allow any other religion to be practiced on its soil. Added was the factor that the majority of 9/11 terrorists were holding Saudi passports.

Despite President Musharraf's full cooperation with the US in the war on terror, there is increasing belief in the West that: "Al-Qaeda is reorganising in Pakistan. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri and other leaders are hiding in Pakistan. British and other extremists obtain terrorist training in Pakistan, and the US have caught a majority of high value detainees in Pakistan." (Philip Gordon, Brookings Institution).

This kind of thesis, factual but without rigorous investigation, has landed the Muslim diaspora in the West in the position of negotiating a perilous existence in the land of their birth.

The West has to admit that the Iraq invasion has been a disaster, and has broken the security blanket so long enjoyed by not only the West but also by the entire international community. Consequently, the Islamic extremists have targeted the West for its perceived moral degeneration and hypocritical foreign policy (e.g. Israel), and the Islamic countries for their "laxity" in following the Islamic edicts.

Besides, the doctrine of pre-emption, despite Western attempts to justify it as necessary for facing the threats emerging in the 21st century, remains controversial because the international

community remains committed to the United Nations as the ultimate destination for solution of interstate conflicts.

Developing countries, having gone through the agony of colonisation, are zealous in guarding their sovereignty. US advocacy of liberal democratic values has not been able to convince the countries in its backyard.

Chavez of Venezuela, Ortega of Nicaragua, Lula of Brazil, Michelle Bachelet of Chile, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and Lopez Obrador of Mexico are current examples of the Left sweeping over Latin America.

They are neither Marxists nor Soviet camp followers. They are the products of low growth rates, dismal poverty, extreme inequality, high unemployment, and military dictatorship.

They are modern, open minded, reformists and internationalists, but in favour of social improvement over macroeconomic orthodoxy, egalitarian distribution of income over wealth creation, of national ownership of natural resources in place of foreign ownership. In short, they are left of centre.

It would, therefore, appear that the road towards democracy does not necessarily have to follow the US or the Westminster model, but can be home-grown, so long as democracy, meaning the consensus of the great majority of the people on the goals to be achieved and the benefits to be reached to all sections of the people, in Bangladesh is freely and transparently determined.

Kazi Anwarul Masud is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

Flood protection by improving rural housing

The concentration of people would make schools and health care centres easily available to all, and more land would be freed for cultivation of cash crops and other food stuffs. By doing all these we can make Bangladesh a lush green garden and a nice country to live in. Good schools and health care facilities will make village life attractive and the pressure on the cities will be greatly reduced.

TAYEB HUSAIN

FLOOD protection can be supplemented and made more viable by improving the housing of rural Bangladesh. Over 80% of our people live in the villages and due to poor housing most of them live in a deplorable condition. Our government, and the wealthy, seem to care very little about it. With good intentions, and a little effort from the public and private sectors, things can be changed very dramatically and, thereby, the living standard and quality of life of our people can be improved tremendously.

Let us consider a Bangladeshi village today. Thatched houses, if one can call them houses at all, are scattered everywhere in countryside. They are not good for living, and are scattered in such a way that no road connection, or simple necessary amenities for better living, such as running water, good toilets or washing facilities, can be organised.

For three-four months in a year a large portion of Bangladesh remains under water, and the people are cut-off from each other due to rain and rising water level.

We cannot do anything about that because of the very climate of our country. But certainly we can do something to make living conditions a little better and more acceptable with improved housing, which can also save us from the bad effects and enormous economic loss due to the recurrent floods.

We can do much to control flood and to improve our housing in rural Bangladesh, provided we have the political will to make a change in our village life. Yes, I firmly believe we can do a lot, and we need not keep our villages in utmost poverty and misery any longer. Bangladesh's survival as a nation depends on improvement of our villages, and not in exporting cheap labour or, for some very few, if and when possible, emigrating to US or Canada.

During the last 20 years many roads have been constructed. Is it not possible to move all the thatched houses nearer to the roads in an organised way? On each side of a road we can dig ponds for raising the land high enough to protect the people from floods, and make small townships on these high-rise lands where

each family would have a simple comfortable house. Bringing people together would make it possible to offer each and every family basic facilities such as running water, sanitary toilet, etc. Attached to the houses there could be a small plot for each family where vegetables could be cultivated, and the ponds could be used for farming fish. Schools and healthcare centre, a market etc. could be built within this township.

There could be another way of making cheap and comfortable houses, like the "long houses" in Borneo (now Kalimantan). These "long houses" are built on stilts, and are divided into a public area along one side and a row of private living quarters lined along the other side. Instead of stilts we can have raised land, and use our own imagination while making houses that would be good for our environment and for comfortable living.

One may see a similarity between the Borneo "long houses" and the South American jungle village houses, which are also large single structures for many people. Most importantly, it is not the elegant design but the height that removes the inconvenience caused to the

people by floods. In modern times many of the older longhouses in Borneo have been replaced with buildings using more modern materials, but the design is almost the same.

Long houses in Bangladesh could be used for pleasant, comfortable and safe living for everybody. Parts of them could be used for married couples with small children, and the rest could live together in another part. People would be living in these houses separately, but still together, making life pleasant and comfortable with constant companionship.

Long houses, with little modification, can be good for improving sanitation and producing gas and fertiliser. Making clean and communal toilets following the Chinese model could be very useful: the waste can be used to produce gas for cooking, street lighting, and fertiliser for agriculture, with very little investment.

Making long houses in a small township would also make more land available for agriculture. Our agriculture could be mechanised and modernised, and each agricultural worker could be employed by an organisation responsible for food production. I think, Grameen Bank could take over all agricultural land of Bangladesh, and food production for the country should be left with such an agro-based institution. Let there be NO absentee landowner in Bangladesh, and let the land belong to those who toil on it. Cattle raising by individuals

can be replaced by common and organised cattle farms. These actions can change our way of life and further the living standard and welfare of our people.

The concentration of people would make schools and health care centres easily available to all, and more land would be freed for cultivation of cash crops and other food stuffs. By doing all these we can make Bangladesh a lush green garden and a nice country to live in. Good schools and health care facilities will make village life attractive and the pressure on the cities will be greatly reduced.

So far, what could be done for better houses and better living in the villages has been suggested, but how to finance it? We need to consider various possibilities for materialising our suggested plan. What are those possibilities that can make our ideas come true?

First and most importantly, we need a political decision supported by social and cultural movement to do what we desire. Vested interest groups who own the land, and who are mostly absentee landowners, would oppose the idea vehemently. But what right should one have on agricultural land, especially in a country like Bangladesh where millions are landless, that he does not cultivate himself? We need to ponder for a while on how we keep our people and the society at large poor and vulnerable by giving the land ownership to some people who have nothing to do with cultivation.

Many developed countries have rules that do not allow people to own agricultural land if they are not trained or educated in agricultural work, and pursue the profession as a full time occupation. Could not, or should not, we adopt such laws for our country? And if we can give land to people who toil on it, surely a substantial economic up-lift will occur, and a promise of a nice comfortable house would lure many to go to any length to get it. Apart from this, house building finance can help people to build such houses.

A massive program for constructing rural houses phase by phase by the government would be another way to make better housing and, thereby better living for the villagers. We must also remember that the estimated cost of the present flood is estimated to be \$6 billion. Shall we wait and seek help from Allah only, until a great flood occurs and washes away our whole population to Bay of Bengal? Let us not forget that money is not the problem for good work, if and when there is no lack of good intention. Allah also helps those who help themselves.

Tayeb Husain is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Tokyo's faltering Kyoto target

CLOSEUP JAPAN

To check this unbalanced growth, the report came up with a unique suggestion of 1 kilogram reduction in daily carbon dioxide emissions by each person. In theory this would help the country to reduce emission level by several percentage points if each and every citizen joins the effort and contributes actively. But there is no easy way of convincing people of the benefit of something that remains mostly invisible

MONZURUL HUQ

KYOTO is undoubtedly one of the finest cities of Japan. It also has a long history tracing back to the early period of the founding of the Japanese empire. With more than 4,000 temples and shrines, of which quite a few are among the most attractive and unique in design and structure, the city attracts millions of visitors every year from both within Japan and overseas.

Yet, Kyoto in recent years has expanded this international familiarity further and moved far beyond its earlier position because of the landmark agree-

ment on global environment that was signed in the city towards the end of the twentieth century. The Kyoto Protocol has added a new dimension to this historic city by calling on international community to cut the emissions level of greenhouse gases to a point that would be less harmful to mankind.

But despite reflecting the name of a noble cause of protecting our human habitat for the benefit of future generations, the city itself is not entirely immune to the harmful effect of uncontrolled emission that had been marked by the advanced industrialised countries right from the early days of industrial revolution.

The unbearable summer heat

makes life in Kyoto a bit difficult for both local residents as well as short-term visitors. Since the city is surrounded by mountains from all sides; the heat never seems to subside and the locals complain about global warming as being the cause behind increasing summer temperature.

Japan is witnessing an unprecedented heat wave this year as mercury, in some parts of the country, reached above 40 degree Celsius with no trace of any rain. Twenty-four people across Japan have died during the first half of the week of heatstroke and water accidents. Since high temperature is expected to continue for a few more days, casualty figure is sure

to rise further.

The prevailing weather condition is also jeopardising the efforts of the government to spread the message of the importance of leading an environment-friendly lifestyle that calls for less usage of air conditioners, automobiles and other household amenities.

The urgency to carry the message is being felt more by policymakers because of Japan's increasingly expanding shortfall in meeting the target of reducing the emissions level set by the Kyoto Protocol. Officials fear that unless Japan takes drastic steps to meet its Kyoto Protocol target for greenhouse gas reductions, it would be difficult for the country to fulfil the international commitment.

The 1997 protocol requires Japan to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases it releases into the air to 6 per cent below 1990 levels between 2008 and 2012. But according to a joint report published recently by the ministry of environment and ministry of economy, trade and industry, the measures included in the current government reduction plan will

lower Japan's emission by around 4 per cent in 2010 from the 1990 level.

Even after accounting for offset measures like absorption of carbon dioxide by plants and emission credits obtained in developing countries that are allowed under Kyoto Protocol, Japan's emission will be only 3.3 to 4.5 per cent lower than its 1990 level. That means Japan will fall short of reaching the 6 per cent reduction mark and new measures has to be taken to secure an additional cut of 2 percentage points.

During the base fiscal year of 1990, which is used to calculate emissions changes under the Kyoto Protocol, Japan emitted greenhouse gases equivalent to 1,261 billion tons of carbon dioxide. Under the terms of the Protocol, the country is required to reduce emissions to 1,186 billion tons a year between 2008 and 2012. But the latest estimates show that carbon dioxide emissions by the mid-point of 2010 will reach 1,273 to 1,287 billion tons.

Even after taking other factors

like carbon dioxide absorbed by the forests and emission credits generated from eco-friendly projects in developing countries into account, 2010 emissions are likely to overshoot the target by 1.5 to 2.7 percentage points or 20 million to 30 million tons.

The report, as a result, focuses on urging business community and consumers to make greater effort for emission reduction. The business community, particularly, has been encouraged to develop voluntary plan by setting numerical target for each industry.

It should be noted that energy efficiency of Japanese manufacturing plants has already been improved significantly. The projected emission from industrial sector in 2010 is estimated to be about 9 per cent lower than the level of 1990. As a result, any new incentive for that sector is targeted to motivate the industry to cut emissions even further. It is the household sector that still remains a problematic area in emission control.

As the report suggested, car-

bon dioxide emission from households in 2010 will grow more than 10 per cent from the 1990 level, and those from offices and other business-related facilities will increase by around 30 per cent.

To check this unbalanced growth, the report came up with a unique suggestion of 1 kilogram reduction in daily carbon dioxide emissions by each person. In theory this would help the country to reduce emission level by several percentage points if each and every citizen joins the effort and contributes actively. But there is no easy way of convincing people of the benefit of something that remains mostly invisible. According to official estimates, replacing air-conditioners and lighting equipments with energy-efficient models would lead to a 0.3 kilogram reduction in daily carbon dioxide emissions.

In Japan, nuclear power generation has been promoted as a powerful means to control greenhouse gas emission. But nuclear power plants have their down

side as well, as it was exposed recently by the closure of the country's largest nuclear power station in Niigata prefecture. The Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Plant halted operations after it was shaken by a powerful earthquake that hit the region around mid-July.

The operator of the power station, Tokyo Electric Power Company, estimates that the suspension of the plant will lead to a 2 per cent jump in Japan's carbon dioxide emissions in current fiscal year alone as the operator is now switching over to conventional thermal power generation to overcome the shortfall.

As a result, as the core five-year period from 2008 to 2012, the time when reduction of emissions is to be strictly monitored, is fast approaching, the Kyoto target for Japan seems to be an uphill climb and much is still needed to be done for the target and not remain only in the paper.

Monzurul Huq is a columnist of The Daily Star.