

IT for empowerment

Ensure easy access of the poor to the technology

THE Chief Adviser to the caretaker government could not have been more explicit when he said while inaugurating the programme of Mission 2011 that access to information technology (IT) could empower the poor and rural population considerably. While the theme of the mission - "Building a Sustainable ICT-based Information and Knowledge System for the Poor and Marginalised" is encouraging the aim to set up 40,000 telecentres all over Bangladesh by 2011, raising the number from present 800 only, is no doubt spirit-lifting. What remains to be seen is timely implementation of the mission objective.

In the present technology-driven world, holistic progress in all sectors can hardly be attained without using information super highway. The benefits of having well-laid-out ICT network in a society abound in many developed and developing countries of the world for others to emulate. Bangladesh too stands at the threshold of entering a whole new world of progress and prosperity through making the large population more IT-savvy than before. But the key word here is accessibility, and this has to be ensured through government and private initiatives so that the technology reaches the poorer sections in community at affordable cost.

The unending source of knowledge and information available in the information super highway would immensely benefit the rural population, the disadvantaged and the unemployed by linking them up across the digital divide with others at more advantageous position. This would provide them with employment and work opportunities and help generate economic activities in a wider context. In fact record shows that e-commerce has brought about revolutionary changes in many countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia as well as in transition economies. Besides economic benefits, use of IT would also help change the rural health care scene if field level health workers and paramedics can have access to required information in time.

We appreciate the national and international key players extending their assistance in making the mission a reality. But here we would like to stress once again on keeping the issue of affordability of our poor and rural population in focus while implementing the project. We are confident that our eminent researchers, IT experts, academics and telecentre practitioners would be there to provide valuable guidelines in this regard. By any means the project should go ahead in full speed.

Probing institutionalised corruption

The campaign must be thorough and produce results

THE campaign that the Anti-Corruption Commission plans to undertake soon against institutional as well as institutionalised corruption is one the nation will certainly welcome, for obvious reasons. In these past many years, graft has eaten away at the vitals of society with the result that citizens have always found themselves at the receiving end of manifest injustice. Indeed, corruption across many tiers, notably in the public sector bodies, has been synonymous with harassment of the general public. If now the ACC can truly get into the business of ferreting out the corrupt elements in the utility services, one can be reasonably sure that a semblance of normality will come to life.

And yet the task will not be an easy one. This is because over the years innumerable rags to riches stories involving individuals with suspect motives have consistently undermined the principle of public service. The instance of a meter reader who, through establishing a nexus of bribery and gratification in the power sector, has enriched himself far beyond his legitimate means to do, is a case in point. It is but one instance; and there are instances galore to show that while citizens have been given short shrift where provision of services is concerned, officials and employees in such areas as the power, gas, telephone and water supply sectors have conveniently established a chain of corruption in which they have provided protection to one another. It is this chain that must be broken, ruthlessly and swiftly, if the ACC means to produce results.

Let the ACC go all-out in probing the corruption that has undermined the working of utility services-related organisations. Investigations into corruption within the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakha are already underway; and similar is the inquiry into wrongdoing within the Dhaka City Corporation. The ACC's plans regarding legal action against corrupt elements in these bodies as well as forwarding its recommendations to the government should be based on thorough investigations so that no loopholes allow such investigations to fall through. We are pleased that the government has lately been emphasising a citizens' charter of rights. That can only add a new, positive dimension to the overall drive against corruption at all levels.

We welcome the ACC's new move. However, we would also like to sound a caveat here: even as the drive against institutionalised corruption goes on, care must be taken that the normal flow of work at the bodies under the microscope and their service delivery goes on without interruption.

Reducing water sector corruption



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

A joint publication undertaken by the Stockholm International Water Institute, the Water Integrity Network and the Swedish Water House has focused on a vital area of our daily life -- clean water. In this context conservative estimates have indicated that the lack of access to clean water causes the death of five million people worldwide every year. The study helps us to understand the magnitude of the problem by asking us to consider 34 jumbo jets, each carrying 400 passengers, crashing every day of the year. That adds up to about 12,500 planes annually. This is indeed a frightening scenario.

A careful examination of this problem suggests that the main reason behind the paucity of clean water is not the lack of natural supply of water, nor any engineering or technical problem. It would appear that this global water crisis is primarily due to poor governance, corruption and dysfunction of existing institutional arrangements.

A South Asian Regional Workshop on Transparency and Integrity in the Water Sector organised recently by the Transparency International Bangladesh in cooperation with the Water Integrity Network in Dhaka has revealed many interesting factors. Participated by 68 representatives from all South Asian countries (other than Afghanistan and Bhutan) and also from Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Netherlands and the

United Kingdom the workshop identified that the scope of corruption not only varies substantially across the sector in different countries but also that according to estimates by the World Bank 20 percent to 40 percent of water sector finances are being lost to dishonest and corrupt practices.

Participants, narrating their experience, underlined that ecosystems were suffering in general throughout South Asia. Stakeholders from different

unsatisfactory state of affairs not only within South Asia in general but also Bangladesh in particular. In more ways than one, participants also pointed out how corruption not only affects the governance of water by affecting who gets what water when, where and how but also how it determines how costs are to be distributed among individuals, society and the environment.

The importance of the workshop for Bangladesh was made

decision-making. It was felt that this was happening because it involved the implementation of large projects undertaken by the construction sector that is most prone to corruption and open to the influence created by the nexus of corrupt politicians, public officials, consultants, civil works contractors and suppliers. In this context, the meeting agreed that corruption generally involved activities such as illegal connections, false meter readings and

proposal. I am confident that there is a great potential for success in combating corruption in this strategic sector if the above measures can be introduced. We, in Bangladesh as well as the rest of South Asia, could then move forward towards the meeting of the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. We should also be mentally prepared, particularly our bureaucrats and scientists to share our experiences of best practice within the water sector. This will definitely help the mutual learning curve.

The time to take action is now. We have to be preventive rather than reactive. We also have to recognise that no one is immune to corruption. Poor marginalised women, well-educated scientific experts and well-meaning activists can all be part of the problem. We have to build a comprehensive network of actors from the local to the regional level to reduce corruption within the water sector. This should include within its matrix all spheres of society -- private, public and civil.

The recommendations included in the declaration reiterated that steps be taken to: (a) ensure that the policy and institutional framework, especially the judiciary and law enforcement institutions, conform to practices pertaining to the rule of law. This is important given the disparate nature of the existing framework; (b) prepare a monitorable and accountable anticorruption plan to address forms of corruption that prevent equal access to water services and also erode the quality in the implementation of projects; (c) prepare a strict procurement regime based on transparency and accountability. It has also been suggested in this regard that this would be facilitated through the use of standardised procurement documentation, public disclosure of all major procurement-related decisions (including evaluation criteria and reports) as well as the active involvement of civil society organisations and local community groups. What a fantastic

POST BREAKFAST

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Bangladesh institutions particularly highlighted that corruption had become pervasive in this sector. Those from India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka mentioned that non-functioning public institutions had encouraged the use of bribes. These were paid to cover up the discharge of wastewater and toxins into water bodies, streams and rivers. It was also apparent from the discussion in the meeting that corruption was increasing transaction costs and discouraging investments in infrastructure related to power production. Some representatives from abroad also took this opportunity to highlight that lack of wider stakeholder participation in water resource management and delivery was indirectly encouraging corruption. This in turn was jeopardising the democratic principles of equal access in decision making and reducing public agencies to instruments of private benefit.

In other words, the workshop focused on some of the critical reasons that had led to the current evident through the presence of Dr. Huguette Labelle, Chair of the Board of Directors of Transparency International, Berlin and the Adviser for the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives of Bangladesh. It was good that necessary acknowledgement was being taken of the serious ills that plague the water sector in Bangladesh.

There was a declaration that was issued at the end of this regional workshop. It was only correct that such an action should have been taken. It reflected agreement in principle that there was a serious problem within the water sector throughout South Asia and that there was need to find solutions.

The declaration underscored that access to safe water is a fundamental human right, which should be ensured and safeguarded. It also noted that the water sector is prominently susceptible to corruption because of its monopoly structure and the absence of suitable accountable

inaccurate billing juxtaposed with unsatisfactory collection levels that severely damaged the financial viability of water utilities and hampered their efforts in providing adequate water and sanitation services and coverage to consumers. This assessment appears to be especially true in the case of Bangladesh.

We all agree that corruption undermines efficient management of water resources. A case in point is our WASA that has degenerated as a public institution. Its inability to function in the expected mode is affecting the quality of life of millions of consumers and citizens throughout Dhaka. The same sorry state of affairs is also true of other water delivery institutions throughout Bangladesh. All this is probably happening because of the nonexistence of appropriate legislation and regulation that can promote transparency, accountability and access to necessary information required to combat corruption within the water sector.

The importance of the declaration

reduce mutual suspicion that is the trademark of South Asia.

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Heady mix of religion and politics

KULDIP NAYAR
writes from New Delhi

GUJARAT and Punjab are the two states in India, which are ill at ease most of the time. Their problem is not economic but narrow thinking. Most of the blame lies on the governments because they do not allow people to rise above their limited and personal agenda dinned constantly into their ears. The fallout is that the two states are often absorbed in non-issues and suffer the consequences of mixing religion with politics.

When it comes to mixing politics with religion, none is more adept in it than Chief Minister Narendra Modi of Gujarat. It was generally felt that he would leave the 1992 killings aside and appeal to the voters in the name of development, which was impressive. Instead, he has reigned the embers of communal bias from the days of rioting.

Once again his agenda is Hindutva. He has told even the few Muslim leaders who have stuck to the BJP not to take part in campaigning in the state. On the other hand, the BJP has fielded no Muslim candidate in Gujarat. One Muslim in the party's top leader-

ship has recalled how the minority leaders were also kept aside in the UP assembly elections a few months ago. This indicates how hypocritical was the BJP's support to Taslima Nasreen, an author from Bangladesh, for asylum in India.

If Modi manages to have a majority in the assembly election later this month -- reports are that he may scrape through -- he would have proved that he has brainwashed the Hindus in Gujarat to

about Modi's role before the polls. At least, the Central Election Commission, independent as it is, should do something. Granted it cannot take action against him, it can at least see that Modi's campaign follows the code of conduct in spirit as well. A campaign, however regional in character, cannot degenerate into a diatribe against the minority community through innuendos, or indirect references.

The commission has to ensure

states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh? If the Centre remains a mute spectator in the case of Gujarat, what is the guarantee that the future of minorities in the other BJP-run cities would be in any way better?

The only redeeming factor is the media's relentless effort to expose Modi's doings and to insist on the state and the central governments to rehabilitate the Muslim victims at the very places where they lived

gurdwaras is by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), an elected body by the Electoral College of Sikhs. Yet it is an open secret that the Akalis have their own men elected to the SGPC and use the body as an instrument of agitation for its demands -- political, religious or social. In return, the Akali Dal gives the SGPC members many facilities, a vicarious satisfaction to govern.

However, more debatable is the portrait is the text written below it: "The great Sikh General of the 20th century and the 14th chief of the Damdami Taksal, Sant Gian Singh Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale, who along with numerous valiant Sikhsatta in a martyrdrom on Wednesday, the 6th June, 1984, fighting against the Indian Armed Forces for the honour and prestige of Sri Harminder Sahib and Sri Akal Takht Sahib."

The wordings are unfortunate because the Indian armed forces represent India. The government and India are two separate entities. What happened at the Golden Temple was at the instance of the government, which can be defeated at the polls.

India is a different, independent, a cumulative entity, which has Sikhs as much citizens as people from other communities. What is unfortunate is that Bhindrawale representing fundamentalists has been honoured. This is yet another instance of mixing religion with politics. Punjab cannot progress unless the two are separated. Nor can it attract the much-needed investment until secularism prevails.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

BETWEEN THE LINES

The only redeeming factor is the media's relentless effort to expose Modi's doings and to insist on the state and the central governments to rehabilitate the Muslim victims at the very places where they lived before the planned rioting. NGOs are also another hope. They have done a tremendous job in the last few years. What depresses me is that the Gujaratis, outside Gujarat, have done little to put those living in the state to shame.

such an extent that despite their intelligence and dynamism, they have not been able to overcome the tug of religion. If after five years of pogrom where thousands of Muslims were murdered and looted and the bulk of the Hindu community remains unrepentant, it is more than a shame.

The situation is tragic because the Centre does not dare to move against Modi despite an array of reports of his involvement. The Supreme Court has also described him as Gujarat's Nero when the state was burning. The inquiry committee, sitting for the last

five years, has not yet given its report. It looks as if the commission does not want to say anything

free and fair polls. That the BJP or Modi does not mention the Muslim community directly is a technicality. The whole tone and tenor of the campaign is against Muslims. The commission should be able to see through it. And what about the Muslims who are on the electoral rolls but cannot be traced?

Yet the most objectionable part of Modi's observation is his description of Gujarat as 'Hindutva laboratory.' The BJP also rules in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, apart from being the coalition partners in Bihar and Punjab. If Gujarat is a laboratory, the BJP should be pleased with the experiment of ethnic cleansing.

When does it duplicate it in the

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Politics in Punjab has been caught for years in the battle that controls the gurdwaras, which have offerings of millions of rupees, with a retinue of employees who come in handy during elections. The ruling Akali Dal has never abandoned its control of gurdwaras, however indirect.

The management of the

Recently, the state government gave every member two gunners and beacon light on their vehicles, symbols of authority.

The installation by the SGPC of militant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale's portrait at the Golden Temple cannot be without the knowledge of the Akali Dal. Was the party

forced by the hardliners to do so or was it meant to frighten the Centre to cough up more money in the name of fighting terrorism? Such questions are difficult to answer. But they reflect a particular outlook, which had embraced Punjab by militancy some 10 years ago.

The hanging of the portrait on a

Sidr aftermath: Hold firm the helm of economy

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

THE Chief Adviser of the caretaker government was very right when he exhorted the people of southern districts of Bangladesh as very brave being used to live with the unpredictable nature. The ultimate cost of such bravery, however, has been so very heavy as would blunt our imagination.

Surnamed 'Sidr' the cyclone created havoc in the southern districts mostly razing every thing on its way. Trees were uprooted, crops in the field awaiting harvest were damaged beyond salvation. Every homestead was ruthlessly battered. The death toll of human beings was about 4000 till the last report came in. This didn't include innumerable missing. Many fishermen who went out the day before to the sea to catch fish were yet to return home. Perhaps

they would never come back. The onslaught of the cyclone reaching a velocity of about 250 kilometer per hour with the sea waters rising 20-25 feet high ransacked the Sundarbans. Many deer and a number of other wild animals were washed out to the Bay. A big part of the mangrove forest was rendered barren.

Indeed the beauteous form of nature assumed an angry, viciously hostile look all of a sudden. Our meteorological department had sensed the danger quite in time and sent out cautionary signals to the people living in the coastal belt and the myriads of fishermen in their boats afloat in the mid-sea. Yet many people in the danger zone preferred watching the situation. They couldn't anticipate the conditions would aggravate. Those who left their homes for safer places and

recess owes its origin to some unplanned administrative steps and their negative impact following anti-corruption move of the caretaker government. All these have affected activities of the business community. Likewise, it has slowed down the hitherto rapid process of investment.

Along with it the ever spiraling prices of fuel in the world market is creating direct impact on the prices of essential commodities, food and other items and in consequence where the pressure of inflation is ever mounting. The government had started to take some steps as would contain the warning situation after two successive floods. Unfortunately, the recent cyclone has put all those upside down.

Right at this moment, the work of rehabilitation of the affected people has assumed topmost

priority. Yet, in the days ahead the rate of inflation, now over seven per cent, is feared to rise further due to the massive destruction of the standing crop in the field. The degree of loss sustained by the industrial sector will also have a negative effect on the export earnings, it is apprehended. On the other hand the rate of implementation of ADP of the government stands at a very low point. This reflects that not only the private sector the investment of the state has also gone down. Revenue earnings of the government have not also been satisfactory due to lack of unfettered business and commercial activities.

Against such a backdrop it shall be imperative to augment investment in both the public and the private sector. Particularly, it shall be expedient on the part of the government to create employment opportuni-

ties by way of enhancing financial support to the rural sector of the economy. In the same breath expeditious measures should be taken for obtaining release of donor funds quickly. In the whole process the involvement of the private sector will also have to be ensured. An all-pervasive national endeavour can only restore the desired mobility in the national economy rapidly.

Lastly, we have got to take lessons anew that cyclones and violent upsurge of the sea and mighty rivers have been responsible for huge loss of human lives. There must be a renewed realisation about the urgency for a more enhanced preparedness to face such catastrophe. This should include erection of cyclone shelters at every village in the coastal belt not beyond one kilometer i.e. be in such proximity as would enable the villagers reach them easily. This particular issue will hopefully receive highest priority of the government.

Meantime, all our efforts should be to reach relief to the affected people quickly. It can be a joint endeavour of the public and the private sector to make it more cohesive and effective. And finally some appreciation for the courageous people of the coastal belt in the words of none other than