

Monitoring primary school administration

If the quality of our primary education cannot be improved rapidly we shall never be able to develop the quality of our citizens. With low quality of primary education the quality of high schools students is bound to be affected. Ignoring primary education means ignoring education in general.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

WE have been hearing a lot about development of primary education in Bangladesh ever since independence. No doubt the governments tried to increase the allocation of funds for primary schools as much as possible from year to year. The multilateral and bilateral donor agencies are assisting in various development projects of primary education. Despite all these, we do not see any visible qualitative improvement in primary education. For the last decade and a half the governments attempted to improve teaching of English in the primary school students, but could not succeed.

Though graduate and post-graduate assistant teachers are appointed these days no marked improvement in the situation is visible. If the present state of affairs continues there may not be any real improvement in the standard of education in primary

schools in the near future. Thus, we need some quick action to overcome this hopeless situation. Ever since the nineties, successive governments utilised the education sector, for political gains. No doubt some education commissions or committees were set up since 1972 for overall development of education, but their recommendations were dumped.

The democratic regimes of 1991-2006 failed to formulate any education policy. Instead, there was politicisation of the education department. It is reported that a large number of under-educated housewives were recruited since 1973 due to political pressure.

Because of poor management at the directorate of primary education such a situation was allowed to continue. It is said that some of these recruits hardly attend schools, though they are shown as present with the connivance of the headmaster and the concerned primary education officer. They are surviving because

of regular payment of bribes to the concerned officers of the directorate. They may be found in large number even in Dhaka. How much the students of government primary schools can learn from these teachers is anybody's guess.

The government is running free primary schools to spread education among the poor children. In reality, the parents of these children have to pay various fees in different names and forms -- admission fee, examination fee, sports fee etc. The irregularly collected fees (a sort of extortion) are distributed among the teachers, members of the managing committee, officers and staff, and thana education officers (usually in the form of gifts and light entertainment).

Needless to say that payment for such purposes discourages poor parents of the students from sending their children to schools. These may be termed as anti-government activities and, as such, may be stopped forthwith.

A few words about the quality of



ADMAN DRIS NEWS

administration of primary schools. Though we never heard about good administration of the department of education, efficiency level has touched rock-bottom due to lack of adequate monitoring by concerned agencies, particularly during 1991-2006. Recruitment in those days was done through questionable means.

It is difficult to accept that CTG will receive adequate cooperation from these recruits. It may be suggested in this regard that the Election Commission may be careful about appointing school-teachers as polling officers during

election to save themselves from possible public comments about the credibility of the election.

Public money is to be spent only on public interest. The donor agencies are assisting us to build a stronger foundation for democracy, which needs education of the people. After the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu no government could show any sincerity of purpose with regard to education, and the biggest victim of this governmental indifference is the primary education of the country. It may be observed in this regard that if part of the recommendations of the Qudrat-e-Khuda

Commission had been implemented there could be visible good impact on the education sector.

If some revolutionary change is to be brought in the primary education the CTG may make a start. In preparing the ground for reforms what is needed is removal of irregularities, corruption, and politicisation of the administration. The undereducated and other irregularly appointed teachers must be removed. The existing system of inspections by the officers of the Directorate General of Primary Education may be sharpened by setting up a two-member

team, with inclusion of a member from the D.C.'s office.

It is reported that a large number of cases of corruption was pending in the former Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB). It is said that the concerned officers did not any action on these complaints either because of influence from outside or because they took bribes. We hope that the ACC will take note of these omissions of the ACB. It is presumed that a good number of these cases relate to primary education administration.

The corruption and poor management of thana offices of pri-

mary education are well known. This is mainly due to politicisation and inexperience of a large number of thana officers. The situation is aggravated by placement of some politicised and inexperienced headmasters.

Because of the headmasters' inefficiency the thana education officers are receiving undue benefits from the schools. The process of extortion is growing due to blessings from the thana office and the managing committee, and the ultimate sufferers are the poor parents of the students.

If the quality of our primary education cannot be improved rapidly we shall never be able to develop the quality of our citizens. With low quality of primary education the quality of high schools students is bound to be affected. Ignoring primary education means ignoring education in general. We must not ignore the fact that if the government can offer better service and save the poor parents of the students from extortion it would be considered as a remarkable achievement by the common men as its benefit will touch the lowest rung of the society.

The writer is a former joint secretary.

A hot cup of tea

Bangladesh is a land hungry country. It can neither afford to keep land unutilised or underutilised nor can it afford to import tea. The tea industry in Bangladesh is making a substantial amount of profit for the last couple of years by selling its tea in local auctions. It made more than Tk.8 hundred million profit only in 2007, but re-ploughed in the industry a very negligible amount to stop the decaying of the plantation and the negative outflow, or to stop the threat of import of tea in future.

SYED A. HASIB

TEA is a very popular healthy drink and is the cheapest beverage in the world. In Bangladesh it is a hot drink but in many countries of the world -- particularly in Europe and America -- it is not only a hot drink, but is

also drunk as cold tea, ice tea, tablet tea etc.

Unlike many other drinks, it is organic and is considered as a medicinal drink. In China, Japan, India and Australia research is being conducted on its effect on diseases like cancer, blood pressure, hypertension, diabetes, and

on cardio-vascular, intestinal or teeth diseases. It is mostly produced in some of the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Bangladesh produces tea in 158 tea estates in Sylhet and Chittagong, and some of the smallholdings newly established in Panchagarh district in northern

Bangladesh. It was one of the major exports in the seventies, and used to earn a good amount of foreign exchange, next to jute and jute products, fish, hides and skins. Now its position as an exportable commodity is insignificant, and in the very near future it may be listed as one of the imported items. This is because the local production could not compete with the rate of increase of consumption of tea, which is mainly due to increase of population, change of their food habits, and rapid urbanisation.

Bangladesh used to produce about 45 million kgs of tea and export about 35 million kgs annually in the seventies. Now, produc-

tion has gone up to 58 million kgs but export has come down to 10 million on average annually.

But it should not happen since Bangladesh had plenty of scope to increase its production, in both horizontal and vertical ways. The tea industry in Bangladesh, which is under private sector management, occupies one lac twelve thousand seven hundred hectare leasehold land. It grows tea only on fifty one thousand nine hundred hectares i.e. on less than 50% of the allotted land.

There are about twenty-one thousand five hundred hectares of land very suitable for extension. Besides, there are about sixteen thousand nine hundred seventy hectares, i.e. about 32.69%, of very old tea plantations (above sixty years), which have lost economic productivity and yield less than 800 kgs of tea per hectare. These areas need to be uprooted, rehabilitated and re-planted to increase the yield and productivity. The average yield of tea per hectare in Bangladesh is only 1250 kgs, which is the lowest among tea producing countries like India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Indonesia, China etc.

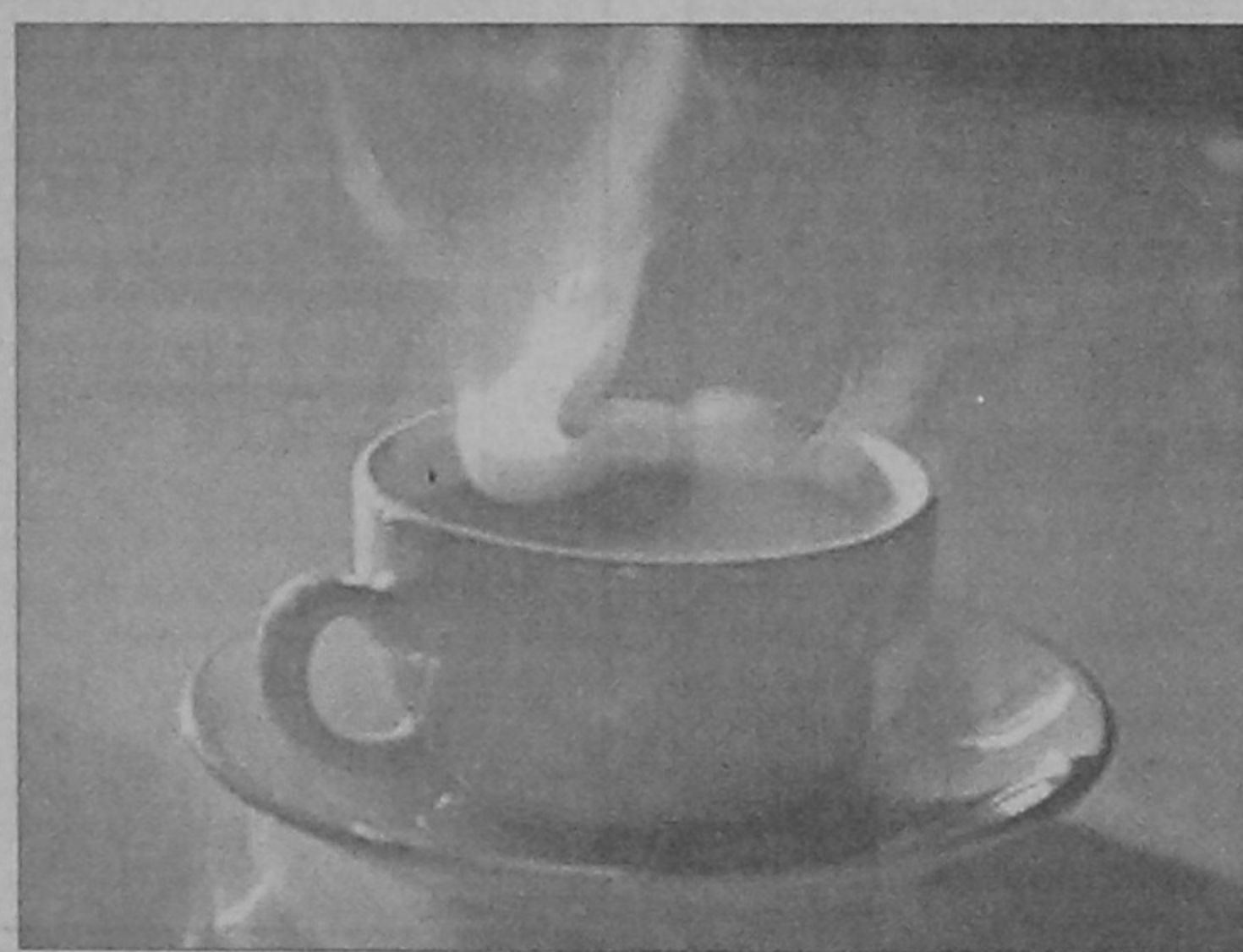
The increased capacity output in Bangladesh, conservatively, is about 60 million kgs, which can be increased to 120 million through utilisation of suitable land, and replanting of uneconomic old tea.

This could easily meet the increased domestic demand, keeping a considerable surplus for export.

Bangladesh is a land hungry country. It can neither afford to keep land unutilised or underutilised nor can it afford to import tea. The tea industry in Bangladesh is making a substantial amount of profit for the last couple of years by selling its tea in local auctions. It made more than Tk.8 hundred million profit only in 2007, but re-ploughed in the industry a very negligible amount to stop the decaying of the plantation and the negative outflow, or to stop the threat of import of tea in future.

The average cost of production per kg of tea in Bangladesh is Tk 68, while the average auction price in 2007 was Tk 85. The industry gets financial support from the government for development and for revenue expenditure at preferential rates of interest, gets ration for its workers at subsidised rates, and fertilisers. It is the failure of the policy makers and the leaders of the industry that they cannot get the benefits of all these opportunities. The people will not excuse them if the burden of import and high price of tea is placed on their shoulders.

The writer is former Director, Bangladesh Tea Board.



The first time I saw Tokyo

The prosperity, the economic boom, and the industrial growth have given the Japanese people one of the highest living standards. This is only the fruition of the their own efforts. In their day-to-day life, the Japanese follow perfect work ethics. They have very nicely rationalised their activities, and follow a system and belief that ensure maximum growth and development.

MOINUDDIN CHISTI

WHEN I first arrived in Tokyo as a beneficiary of a Japanese Government Technical Assistance Program, on a JAL jumbo flight from Bangkok, some years ago I was overwhelmed by the enormous warmth of the people who received me at the airport. It is not always that you see the same smile on the ground as the one you have left behind on board the plane. As I was being driven past the floating Tokyo evening traffic I felt as if the city was illuminating up for a special occasion.

The morning Tokyo traffic is a mixture of humanity coming in and out of the cities transport system, which is an efficient network of underground and surface railway services, taxis, buses and of course private cars. If you stand at the Singiuku Central Station you simply wonder at the massive traffic arrangement for city traffic.

The people who pass by you are well-fed, well-clothed Japanese, who are extremely particular about manners and civic senses. The Japanese sense of aesthetics,

beauty and decorum is for anyone to see in the streets, offices, departmental stores and apartment blocks. The general attire, the flower arrangements, the design and placements of pieces of furniture reflect a refined taste, choice and cleanliness.

Behind the Japanese prosperity lies meticulous planning and research innovations in science and technology, industrial growth, shipbuilding marvels, social security, national health, and social services developments. The Japanese are a homogenous nation of well-knit, well-organised, disciplined and industrious people who have, through sheer hard work and discipline, turned adverse natural conditions to advantages.

Japan is an island nation, consisting of three large islands in the Pacific Ocean, insulated from the outside world. The Japanese, therefore, remained cut-off from the rest of the world for most of the period in their past. With the Meiji Restoration, contact was established with the outside world and the foundation was laid for the development of Japan into an

industrial state, and the present prosperity and development are a fruition of this past.

The total land available for habitat, agriculture and industry is still a mere 12 percent. But Japanese technology today has reclaimed land from the sea at the same speed as it has cleared mountains in the interior, and has set up industries with raw materials procured from sources round the world.

The present level of Japanese growth in science, technology and electronics is significantly indebted to a special relationship with the USA, and a guaranteed protection of the nuclear umbrella provided by the United States, when they could devote their undisturbed attention to economic growth.

The horrors of the Second World War are still fresh in Japanese minds, and they have incorporated a clause in the constitution to forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation (Article-IX). The post-war years have, therefore, seen a relentless growth of Japan's economy, until it, as a country, can lay claim to

continuous trade surplus and achievement of one of the highest GNPs in the world. Peace, therefore, is essential for Japan to continue and sustain its present growth pattern.

The growth rate of Japan is both the model and envy of the rest of the world. Japanese consumer goods and electronics, from transistor radios to vacuum cleaners, from automobiles to micro-computers, have captured the imagination and market of the entire world.

Japanese respect for democracy is perhaps as strong as their love for the monarchy. They have a bicameral legislature known as the Diet, where national policies are debated and made. The members are elected through universal adult franchise.

The prosperity, the economic boom, and the industrial growth have given the Japanese people one of the highest living standards. This is only the fruition of the their own efforts. In their day-to-day life, the Japanese follow perfect work ethics. They have very nicely rationalised their activities, and follow a system and belief that ensure maximum growth and development.

The material prosperity, affluence and a high living standard have, however, taken away the thrill, the challenge and the spirit of adventure from young Japanese lives. There is, therefore, a noticeable mark of restlessness among

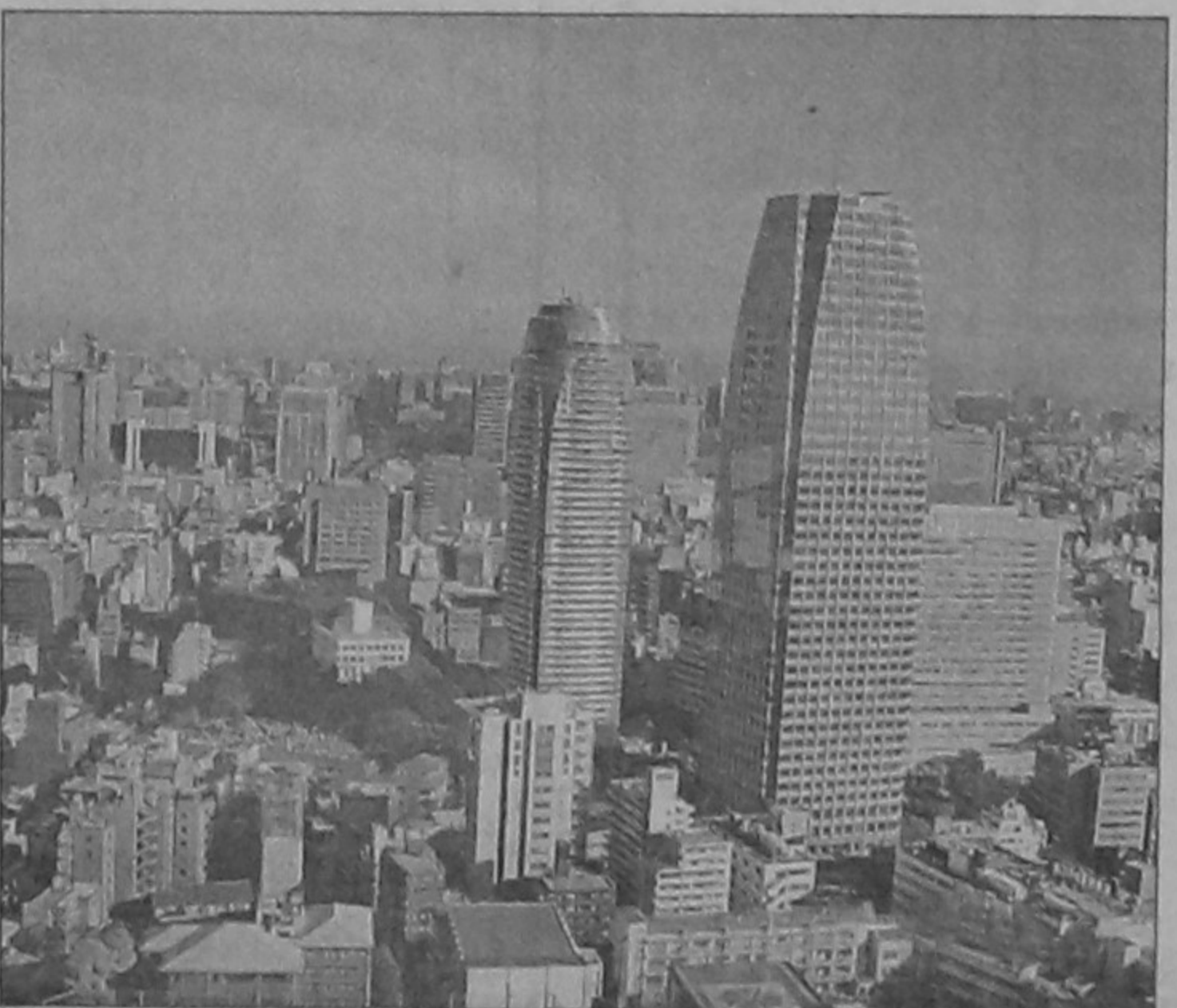
the Japanese, specially the youth. They have begun to suffer from a longing for the romantic past, a craving after the Samurai spirit.

They hate to be known as workaholics and struggle often to get free of the "Economic Animal" syndrome, and are increasingly trying to devote more time in leisure-time pursuits. They are, today, also worried about the worst consequences of industrialisation, such as the pollution of the environment, the increasing automation in the industries (with resultant unemployment), the soaring oil prices (oil shock), the stagflation, etc.

But, as a whole, the Japanese are an extremely pleasant people to

be with, whose sense of humour and priorities are never at fault. I saw Japan twice in the mean-time, and my memory of the country has not faded. The intervening years have failed to erase the picturesque Japanese countryside, with its neat wooden houses seen from the window seat of a Sikanen (Bullet Train), from my mind. Nor have I forgotten the time I spent in Osaka, Nagoya or Kyoto. The thought of the taste and smell of Sukiyaki or Kobe Beef I ate in Japanese restaurants still warms my mouth.

Moinuddin Chisti is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star. The above is from a paper presented at JICA Seminar.






ONLY IN ASIA
by Nury Vittachi

From intelligent elevators to lifts beyond Faith

IMAGINE an elevator that never actually stops moving. It zooms up the east side of the building, disappears into the attic and then reappears, zooming down the west side. It goes round and round, endlessly, night and day. It has no doors. The only way to use it is to throw yourself in as it passes your floor, and leap out when it reaches the floor you want to get to.

Sounds like a nightmare? It was for reader Faith Ratnayake.

A lift exactly like that, called a paternoster, was the only elevator at a skyscraper in the UK's Sheffield University at which she worked in 1962.

"Too scared to embark, I walked up and down umpteen floors every day," she said. "After 46 years of sleepless nights, I appeal to your investigative brain to relieve my addled one: what happens when they reach the top and bottom? Do they turn tail and return upside down? Or cross over to the other side, like politicians?"

Faith, of Sri Lanka, had another reason not to use them -- she wore skirts rather than trousers, so going accidentally over the top and descending upside down would have been indecent.

Well, Faith, your wish is our command. I've long had a death wish, so I was happy to visit that building, disobey the warning signs, and stay in the nonstop elevator as it disappeared up into the attic. (I took a lady friend for company, in case we got stuck.)

It got very dark and noisy, but it didn't turn upside down. After a while, it zoomed sideways. Then it started to head downwards. We promptly stood on our hands to mislead observers into thinking it had turned over at the top.

Later, locals told us of rumours that people with

nowhere else to go sometimes had sex in the brief period in which it disappears into the mechanical bit at the top before reemerging.

Well, I can confirm that this is impossible. There is simply not enough time for serious naughtiness to be committed by any normal person, with the possible exception of experts such as Bill Clinton.

SURREALITY DEPARTMENT: I've always had a problem with the word "surreal," which means "unreal in a strange, dreamlike way." I'm not sure if it is just me, but life seems to me to be almost entirely surreal. Which makes reality unreal. Perhaps it's Asia. Or maybe I just need to get out less. Anyway, from the "reality is surreal" department, I received an announcement telling me that "The Hong Kong China Food Oil Ticket Research Club" has just been disbanded. What a shame. Now the millions of people interested in researching Hong Kong China food oil tickets, and may even know what that phrase actually means, no longer have a place to do whatever they do.

SILLY SIGNS DEPARTMENT: Vast numbers of readers have been sending me signs, instructions and observations, so here are the three best:

Seen on a street in Kyushu, Japan: "Stop. Drive sideways." Sounds like Faith's elevator.

Seen on the front of a jewelry shop in India: "We shoot earholes."

Seen in an ad for a hotel in Spain, sent in by reader Yammie Ting: "The provision of a large French widow in every room adds to the visitor's comfort."

Now there's an offer you don't get in every hotel.

More silly signs at our columnist's silly website: www.vittachi.com.