

How deep corruption seeped!

Clerk amasses Tk 40cr on the job

THE crusade against corruption has been carried out on three levels with varying degrees of seriousness. The first to be taken on by the ACC was corruption in high places; the second that has got underway relates to probing graft in institutions; and the third concerns itself with money making by minions turning into multimillionaires unnoticed behind the façade of a low profile.

It is in the third category that, a third-class employee of Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA) has hogged news headline through a front page report in our paper yesterday based on findings of an intelligence agency. At first an LDC, he soon turned into a metre reader literally grabbing all the ropes of money making by fudging figures and taking commission for under-billing etc. In the process of his bill tampering, as the national exchequer lost millions, the one-man wealth profile grew to a staggering Tk 40 crore including a six-story building, a flat, over 50 bighas of land, saving certificates, businesses, and what have you.

He could indulge in such extensive corruption because his superiors were doing so, let alone some of his peers. This is institutional corruption at its worst when there is a contagion effect of corruption through seepage from top to bottom. Just as money begot money so also money could buy connections and with it impunity. Even the public put up with such glaring instance of exhibitionism because they were resigned to such overnight accumulation of riches or may be that they were afraid of reprisals if they reported against such men.

So for years he had turned his ill-gotten money into assets that were visible and yet no action had been taken against him by either his own office or any government agency including police, intelligence or taxation authorities.

There are many such people in utility and public service organisations who had amassed money likewise. They must be ferreted out and exposed to the public. Such aberrant form of institutional corruption should be placed on the agenda of the ACC in its fight against institutional corruption.

Monga victims to get overseas jobs

Implement the action plan to help them out

THE economic backwardness of people living in certain places in the northern districts, which experience a near famine-like situation (monga) almost every year, is an indicator of the grinding poverty that has shamefully become a perennial feature there.

Against this backdrop, Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation, an NGO, and the Bureau of Manpower Export and Training have taken a commendable initiative to help the overseas jobseekers from the monga-hit areas secure placements abroad. The PKSF and the Bureau have signed an MoU under which training programmes will be arranged for unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The PKSF will also offer financial assistance to the jobseekers to go abroad. Obviously, this will open a new avenue for the monga victims to come out of the vicious poverty cycle. This is the kind of action plan that should have been adopted long ago for the poor people in those areas who remain by and large unemployed during the monga days.

The planners have to ensure that development of rural areas does not become a lopsided affair. There is no way to overlook the truth that the people living in some areas of northern districts are not well covered by the conventional development schemes. Even the reports carried by the press on the extremely precarious existence of monga victims apparently failed to sensitise successive governments.

The planners have to take note of not only economic but also social backwardness of the people cut off from the mainstream of development activities. So the training programmes have to be designed in light of the people's needs and limitations. The local community leaders will have to play an important role in motivating and organising the potential jobseekers.

The monga-prone areas pose a challenge to all our development plans. The affected people suffer silently or try to move to urban areas in search of jobs. That is responsible to a great extent for the speedy growth of slums in the cities which offer far less than what people need to live even a modest life. If the situation improves in the backward rural areas through employment, both local and overseas, it will have a whole-some impact on almost every aspect of our collective existence. It's more than a humanitarian issue; it is a question of meting out justice and maintaining social equilibrium.

Politics of un-finished bridges



SHAHNOOR WAHID

SENSE & INSENSIBILITY



PHOTO: ADIBA DURONI/PRATIM ALI

TODAY we are going to talk about bridges; bridges that were to do what they were supposed to do -- bridge the gaps between two sides underneath which rivers and canals criss-crossed at will. The landscape of Bangladesh demands numerous bridges and culverts over rivers and canals so that people can safely cross over to the other side. In the past, the rural landscape was dotted with bridges made of bamboo, very delicate and dangerous, but they served the purpose.

With modernisation, bamboo bridges were replaced with concrete bridges. These were safer and lasted longer. So that is a short take on bridges in Bangladesh. Now, why have we delved in it leaving aside so many interesting things happening all around? There are reasons for that, and here they are.

Maybe our politicians have been

greatly inspired by the classic movie "Bridge on the River Kwai." Otherwise, why should they remain so obsessed with constructing bridges even in places where no canal or river existed? A Prothom Alo (local Bengali daily) report says there are nearly three thousand bridges in the country that never got completed in five years.

Some of them stand in the middle of nowhere, with no road or canal in the vicinity! Preposterously, there are two bridges built within yards of one another and yet neither of the two is functional!

People stare at the odd looking structures as they pass by, and contemplate whatever has happened to the "aliens" who had arrived one day and built the "thing." Today, the *jonodorodi* politicians, the builders, the master

plan and the money are "gone with the wind." Ah! Another classic! What a coincidence!

Bravo, brother "bridge-builders." As soon as you come to power you sit with the engineers of R&H, Water Development Board, PWD etc., to draw up plans for constructing bridges in your area. You have to show some activity to the people who have given you their votes. So, you organise a *bishal* (huge) public meeting one day in the high school ground and give a fiery speech to explain the necessity of having a bridge for the benefit of the people of the locality. You tell them that they are poor and backward because there is no bridge in the area!

The hungry yet gullible people listen to you in amazement and wonder how they could be so blessed to have such a leader who was an epitome of honesty and

selflessness (Amen)! You "identify" the place where the bridge would be built, never mind if no canal or river existed there. You tell the people that one day you would dig a canal under the bridge, or maybe create an entire river! But a bridge we must have! So, after convincing the people you go back to R&H or PWD or Water Development Board office and tell them to finalise the plan, pronto. Before that you, however, assure the engineer shahabs of their cut in the deal.

Henceforth, you being the Member of Parliament, take all the trouble to run to special *bhabans* to help get the plan approved by the higher authorities, run around to get the money sanctioned, run around more to find the contractor of your choice and then sit down with the engineers and overseers to collect their signatures for clearing the bills (Whew, it's hard work,

man!).

Once 25% of the work has been completed you get the signature of the chief engineer and get the entire amount, 2 crore, 4 crore, 10 crore, and then go to the private club in Dhaka to cool off in the evening. Life is great, man!

So, that is the tale of the many un-finished bridges that dot the country-side as testaments of blatant misuse of power by a section of politicians of this country. Some of those unfinished bridges cost as much as Tk 20 crore but never got finished. On the other hand, in many remote corners of the country people suffer day in and day out for the absence of a small bridge.

Here the local MP had no time to visit those remote areas after the one trip he took to beg for their votes in the election. Once he became the MP, he conveniently forgot about them. He had no

interesting small bridges. Dear readers, you will often come across news items in newspapers that say local people are constructing roads and bridges voluntarily after failing to get government help. They even spend their own money for such projects. While useless bridges were built elsewhere on useless sites, the real ones were never built.

Talking of bridges reminds us of the cracks on the Jamuna Multi-

purpose Bridge. What a shame! After making so much of noise about it being one of the longest bridges of the world we cannot even keep it in good shape! Are we simply a nation of braggarts and boasters, all sound and fury?

We wonder whether everyone, I mean everyone, connected with the construction of the Jamuna bridge should be called to explain why those cracks appeared to make it unstable so soon. I believe this is not something trivial to simply brush under the rug. Engineers and contractors should be taken to the bridge in a body by a probe team, and asked to explain their bit. Let us know who says what about whom. Let us take it seriously for God's sake.

We also want to know from the engineers, past and present, who exerted pressure for those unfinished three thousand bridges dotting the country-side. That was public money spent in the projects, and the people have the right to know where has the money gone. Unless we dare to catch the big fishes, we shall continue to see ourselves at the top of the list of the most corrupt countries of the world. We do not want that, do we?

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Same poor, different poverty



ABDUL BAYES

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The case studies presented above point to the following observation: given a small household size, good health of the earning member, availability of credit and its proper use (especially on home based activities like poultry and vegetables, fruits), access to tenancy market and modern technology, a poor household could possibly overcome food insecurity. The journey is long but never lost.

pick up van driving (9 months) and catching fish (3 months).

Home-grown fruits and vegetables feebly supplemented his total monthly income of Tk 2,112 (\$41) -- double that of 1988. Meantime, in 1999 Kurban borrowed Tk 1,500, at an interest of 120% per annum, for 6 months from Gram Samity (an informal association of villagers that lends money during distress).

But when all was going reasonably well, the 1998 flood came as a bolt from the blue with huge losses for the household. Food insecurity forced the household to cook 1.5 kg/day instead of 2 kg/day. Household members could not have three satisfactory meals. Despite new avenues of income compared to 1988, their economic condition deteriorated further due to spending in the daughters' marriage, flood damage and repayment of loans. The dreams of the ultra-poor household were dashed to the ground by shocks arising from exogenous and endogenous sources.

Four years later, in 2004, Kurban's mother was found living with him and the household size was four. This time health hazards took a toll when two members suffered from cholera and one from toothache, bringing unbearable treatment costs. However, he took loan from a samity to do business of poultry and live-stock.

Net income stood at Tk 3,200 (\$54)/month. Housing condition remained as before, but food condition improved as before, but food condition improved to 2 kg/daily and satisfactory meals could be managed throughout the year. But over-

all economic condition deteriorated, as some of the ducks died, and health hazards haunted the household. Even then, Kurban continued to drive on the treacherous path of poverty.

On the heels of hazards, in 2008, his wife became a member of BRDB and 'borrowed' Tk 20,000 to buy poultry and to improve housing condition. The household has now 150 poultry birds, mostly looked after by his wife. By and large, the household's total income stood at Tk 5,092/month (\$75) from crops grown, poultry, and son's labour.

Housing condition improved: Tin roof, tin wall and mud floor. Storage capacity was created for 20 maunds of crops. Before the last apon season, the household stored 4 maunds of paddy. Now, the household can meet its needs for 6-7 months from own production.

There was an overall improvement in economic condition, despite the recent spikes from soaring prices of food grains. Even last week, preceding the survey, they consumed fish for 4 days; each member now has got 2 pieces of winter clothes. The resilience emanated from: small household size, availability of credit and its productive use in profitable poultry, additional earning member and a tight labour market. Kurban now thinks that his household is poor but not ultra-poor. Of course, the graduation from ultra-poor to poor status took twenty years of tedious journey, even with availability of credit!

Tale 2: Ultra-poor to low income group

Adam Ali Fakir (35) from the same village had four members in his household in 1988. He owned no land but lived in khas land in a house made of tin roof, straw wall and mud floor. Household income was Tk 560/month (\$18), mostly from poultry.

Last year, net profit from poultry was Tk 6,000 -- Tk 5,166/month. By and large, the household's income now is Tk 7,766 (\$115). The household consumes 2 kg of rice/day, there is food security throughout the year, and they consumed fish for 5 days and meat for one day during the week the survey took place. The ultra-poor household in 1988 is now being perceived as a low-income household.

Tale three

Tofazzal Mallik of Majigram village under Pabna district started the same journey with a very small household size of two in 1988. He had 5-6 decimals of land, on which his house stands. His income was Tk 1,200 (\$38) -- twice the income of earlier two cases -- from daily labour in agriculture and works. But, most importantly, as he worked in others' lands and was listening to TV/radio, he learnt how to grow modern variety of rice. He decided to give up day labouring and leased 6-8 decimals to cultivate crops.

Two years later, in 1990, Mallik's income was Tk 2,000 -- Tk 1,666/month. By and large, the household's income now is Tk 7,766 (\$115). The household consumes 2 kg of rice/day, there is food security throughout the year, and they consumed fish for 5 days and meat for one day during the week the survey took place. The ultra-poor household in 1988 is now being perceived as a low-income household.

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Tale five

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

crop stood at Tk 5,720. However, the total income from poultry, wage labour and crops grown stood at about Tk 6,000 (\$102). The household consumed 2.5 kg of rice every day and there was no complaints about three satisfactory meals throughout the year. And very recently, in 2008, with grand children, Adam's household comprised of six members.

Meantime, his wife became a member of an NGO. The household income comprised of farm income, income from day labour and income from poultry. Adam's wife borrowed Tk 5,000 from NGO as initial capital for poultry business in 2004. Now the total capital invested in this business is Tk 50,000 of which Tk 30,000 is from own savings.

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Tale seven

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10 years after Pokharan-II



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

THE PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

Nuclearisation has made South Asia less secure. Millions of its citizens are vulnerable to nuclear-tipped missiles, which cannot be recalled or intercepted. A single first-generation Bomb will kill 800,000-plus people and radioactively contaminate vast swathes of land for centuries. There's no defence against nuclear weapons.

rationale for state decisions.

Now consider what happened soon after the Vajpayee government took office in India in 1998. Four men met -- the prime minister, Principal Secretary Brajesh Mishra, Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) secretary R. Chidambaram and Defence R&D Organisation (DRDO) chief APJ Abdul Kalam -- to discuss India's response to an April II missile test-flight by Pakistan.

They decided to retaliate -- not by test-flying a missile, but by upturning India's nuclear policy of 50 years' standing not to make nuclear weapons, although it might have that capability.

Thus came about the Pokharan-II tests, according to Mr. Mishra (Hindustan Times, May 7), without consultation with the cabinet.

No wonder the tests surprised

India's Bomb Lobby. True to type, it mounted a convoluted defence.

First, if India hadn't tested, Pakistan would have, "embarrassing" India. Second, nukes would make South Asia safe. Third, they would force its leaders to behave responsibly and maturely, preventing conflict. Fourth, nukes would cap India's fast-rising conventional arms spending. Fifth, they would give India leverage in demanding global nuclear disarmament. Sixth, they would raise her global stature and expand policy options.

Today, these arguments stand discredited. India initiated the region's nuclear and missile programs. Reactive Pakistan had nothing to gain politically or militarily by testing first.

Both had nuclear capability

before 1998. But Indian nuclear scientist-managers believed Pakistan didn't. It would stop "bullying" India after Pokharan-II.

Nukes are nothing to be proud of. They are weapons of mass extermination and terrorism against non-combatant civilians, not weapons