

Agriculture in Budget 2008-09



the last two decades are reversed. The recently concluded global summit on resolving the global food crisis, organised by FAO in Rome, set a target for its member nations to increase food production by 50 percent by the year 2030.

The annual budget is a document that states the government's policy and development direction on how the country is going to solve the current food problem, keeping in mind its long-term solution, in a sustainable manner.

This year, the budget has special significance due to the global turmoil in food availability. As expected, the government has increased budgetary allocation in this sector, compared to last year, although not at a significant level.

It appears that input subsidy, price controls and agricultural credit have been identified as the three main pillars for increasing food production. It is an established fact that such types of initiatives will bring only short-term success, and have not proved to be a good model for increasing agriculture production as well as food availability. It will help only to sustain subsistence-farming methods, which will ultimately increase poverty. Expanding safety-net programs is a manifestation of that.

While both public and private investment in the agriculture sector is dwindling rapidly, subsidy has been rising. Subsidy never played a big role in our agricultural development, or in increasing production and productivity. However, it has started rising rapidly since 2005. All coun-

tries provide subsidies to their producers in different forms. Some developed countries even provide subsidy for not producing particular type(s) of crop(s) in a particular year.

Subsidy per farmer in India rose from \$11 in 1986-88 to \$66 in 1999. Japan provided subsidy of \$26,000 per farmer in 1999, and it was \$21,000 in US in the same year. If we compare these data with our situation, subsidy in Bangladesh is negligible.

However, providing subsidy is largely dependent on the 'affordability, and the ability to target beneficiaries who need it most. Here is the problem. In India, both state and strong local governments play a significant role in targeting actual beneficiaries. While in India, mainly in West Bengal, subsidy has a role in increasing agricultural growth; in Bangladesh it is the liberalisation of input supply systems that is behind the agricultural growth.

We have to remember that expanding subsidies means more expansion of governmental activities with generally low efficiency levels. It can sometimes distort a farmer's priority. Subsidy should be used as critical inputs and where maximum benefit can be ensured with minimum support. Subsidy cannot be a substitute for investment.

The question is; how will the budget help our poor farmers to increase food production? In this connection, the recent findings of Mr. Ashok Gulati, IFPRI, 2007 are relevant. Mr. Gulati showed that during the Green Revolution (GR) era in India, returns in agricultural

GDP, followed by education and R&D, were much higher than the subsidy, and now R&D has been playing a major role followed by education. The role of subsidy is negligible now compared to the GR era.

We have to see how the enhanced subsidy will facilitate increase in production. In the current budget, the government has allocated Tk. 350 cores for research, but due to a variety of problems not a single Taka was released. It may be mentioned that the total expenditure on research is not more than 20 percent of the total annual budget of the research institutes, which is extremely low.

If we add some emerging issues such as climate change, biotechnology, molecular and genomic research on rice, the allocated budget will not be adequate.

Reaping the maximum benefit from the allocated money for agricultural development is going to be a challenge. The best hope for the future is that we find the best way to make the best use of the limited resources.

My understanding is that the budget should be more focused on program-based lending. As for example, resources should be allocated to make national extension programs to spread BRRI Dhan47 in saline areas and BRRI Dhan33 in monga areas.

It is worth mentioning that BRRI spread very rapidly due to intensive extension programs undertaken in the 1980s. BRRI needs more support for transfer of flood sub-mergence gene to other varieties of rice. We also need

programs to develop climate resistant crop varieties.

A bench-mark is essential to understand the current situation with regard to climate change in different farming typology. Programs in this regard should be chalked out as early as possible in order to use the Taka 300 cores reserved for climate changes properly and timely. The government should allocate a separate budget for biotechnology research and extension.

Setting up of early warning systems, data collection for monitoring climate behaviour over Bay of Bengal, necessary incentive to help the biotechnology research and extension, fund for national strategic agricultural research aimed at reviving and diversifying agricultural research, strengthening and modernising of agricultural universities, colleges and research institutions, establishing of rural knowledge centres, and use of modern information and communication technologies in each of Bangladesh's 68,000 villages, are pressing demands of the time.

We also need to develop innovative instruments for risk management and crop insurance for poor farmers. Resources required to implement the above said programs can be allocated in the proposed budget.

Debates on global price hikes are still going on at global level. The ultimate burden, out of all those debates, comes to the shoulders of our farmers, giving them target to increase food production further.

We are embracing more and

more reforms in this sector but it is unknown to us how our farmers are adapting with these new initiatives. They have survived the green revolution, liberalisation of input supply systems, globalisation, and they have to survive in open market economy. In India, the government constituted a "Farmers Commission" to know the actual situation of Indian farmers in the face of the market economy.

The Commission was headed by the world-renowned scientist Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, and Dr. R.B. Singh was a member. The team produced a five-volume report, and the recommendations are under active consideration of the government of India. Our policy makers should think about forming a task force to know the real problems of our farmers. It should be supported by budget allocation.

The solution to the crisis is in our hands provided old policies and mind-sets can be left behind. Ultimately, the solution will not come as a miracle, but from our millions of poor farmers.

We need coordinated steps on policy, backed by resources. There must be a clear strategy for investment and resource accumulation in the agriculture sector to increase productivity and farm income, as well as smooth input delivery systems -- which are missing in the proposed budget.

Subash Dasgupta is Assistant FAO Representative, Food and Agriculture Organisation, Dhaka. Views expressed are the writer's own.

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SUBASH DASGUPTA

THE annual Budget 2008-09 focuses on agriculture as a thrust area. Excessive price hikes of food grains and slow-down in food production, at both national and global levels,

have made go back to agriculture again as the engine of growth. The World Bank's World Development Report 2008 emphasises that the GDP growth arising from agriculture is almost four times as effective in reducing poverty as GDP originating from outside the sec-

tor. It is realised that the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 cannot be achieved unless the neglect and under-investment in the agricultural and rural development over

The vanishing

These are some headlines from our tragic past: The Daily Star, July 1, 1996: DU students urge govt. to rescue Kalpana Chakma; July 5: Abduction of Kalpana Chakma: Home Ministry probe demanded; The Independent, July 15: 12 human rights bodies call to rescue Kalpana Chakma; Bhorer Kagoj: July 6: It is a mystery that there is no govt. effort to rescue Kalpana; Janakantha: July 21: Rescue Kalpana; Bhorer Kagoj: July 23: Demands for discussion on Kalpana in Parliament; Sangbad: August 19: Kalpana's mother: HR Commission lying, I want my daughter back.

SHAHER ZAIDI

JUNE 12, 1996. I want my daughter back. This many years later, I still wonder why Kalpana's widowed mother opened the door. Guns and search-lights on the other side. How did she think this would end?

Perhaps Badhuni Chakma didn't have time for calculations. She got out of bed, opened the door, fear made her body rigid. Perhaps she had expected this her whole life. Born Jumma (Pahari), born Chakma.

Frantz Fanon wrote about the wretched of the earth and set a generation's mind on fire. He failed to see that the same wretched could also replicate that model of domination on others. What would Fanon say now?

The rest of that night I remember from news reports of that time. Hill Women's Federation leader, Feminist and campaigner for

Jumma people's rights, Kalpana Chakma, dragged out of her room. Amnesty International's alert the next day said: "Kalpana Chakma and two of her brothers were forcibly taken from their home, blindfolded and with their hands tied." In the subsequent investigation by Ain O Salish Kendra, it was found that Khudiram and Kalindi Chakma managed to escape when their abductors fired at them. But Kalpana Chakma was the real target. The kidnappers did not let her escape. After that night, she was never found.

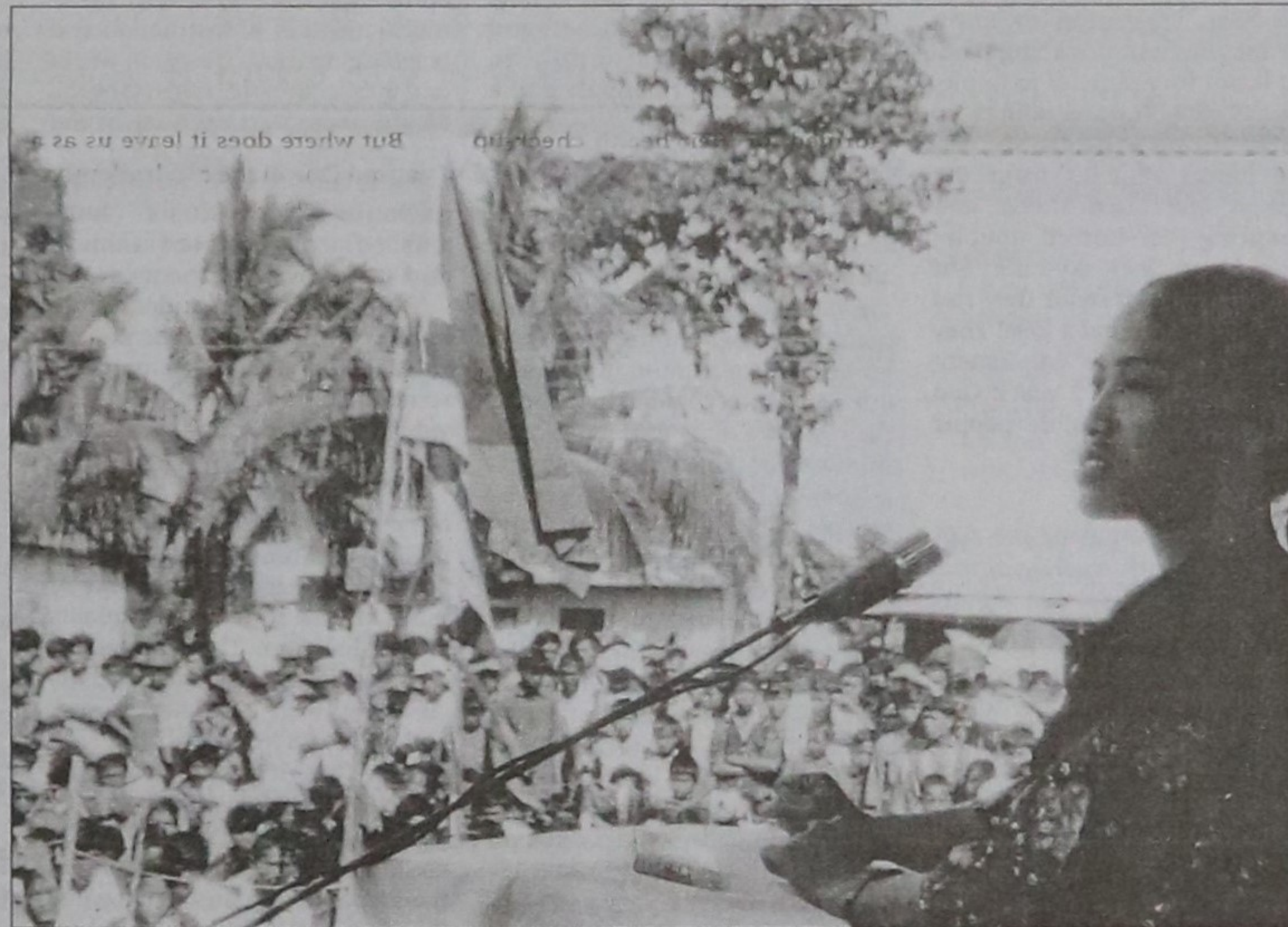
Perhaps to the end of days, Kalindi Chakma will be haunted by those moments as he ran: "They shot at me and when I ran I could hear Kalpana screaming out Dah Dah Mare Baja (Brother, Brother, save me!)." *Dah Dah Mare Baja.*

Kalpana Chakma's disappearance ignited anger over three decades of marginalization in

Chittagong Hill Tracts. Jumma activists called a general strike in the hills. Protests spread to Dhaka, and Bengali civil society joined in. Hunger strikes were held in front of the press club. There were calls to discuss the matter in Parliament.

In a tragic postscript, Bengali settlers attacked these protesters and shot dead 16-year old Rupun Chakma. As tensions grew, assailants also hacked to death Suresh Chakma, Monotosh Chakma and Samar Chakma on their way to Baghaichari bazaar to join the rallies. Tensions reached boiling point.

The rest of the story is the familiar tragedy script. There was an extensive cover up, wiping out traces of the abductors. There were strange rumors planted in the press. That it was a "love affair". That she was in India. The next year the Peace Accord was signed between the Shanti Bahini and the Bangladesh government.



The whole affair was swept under the rug.

Kalpana of course was never found. Mithun Chakma, general secretary of Democratic Youth Forum wrote on his blog: "Dear readers, please don't mistake it for a Shakespearean tragedy. It's real life in Chittagong Hill Tracts."

Twelve years later, the Peace Accord remains largely unimplemented. Having laid

down their arms, disbanded the Shanti Bahini, and given up their call for full regional autonomy, the Jumma (Pahari) people have received little in return. Mainly promises, slogans.

Awareness of a history of injustice in the hills has spread to a much larger portion of the Bengali population, especially the post-1981 generation. Bengalis who support the Jumma people's

demands for a right to fair existence in CHT are speaking up more often. In other countries, we have historically seen that the minority's rights cannot be guaranteed until the majority is shamed into speaking up. Perhaps that moment is finally arriving in Bangladesh.

Shaher Zaidi is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Defiling our cultural spaces

When the local plan recommends that this space be left primarily open, not only for cultural reasons but also for urban sustainability (reduce traffic generation, reserve soft surfaces in an area surrounded by higher elevation), isn't it an irony that in the midst of all these cultural spaces the most conspicuous and pompous structure should be an electronic market?

ZARINA HOSSAIN

ANY city worth its name respects and reveres its cultural spaces. In so many ways, they define who we are. These cultural spaces may be in various forms, and evoke diverse emotions. They may be in different stages of development, but rarely are they engulfed with mindless commercial enterprises. I speak of the Police Plaza at Nandan Kanon Chittagong.

Nandan Kanon means an aesthetic garden. This is perhaps what the area generally was. Once upon a time, the site of this Plaza was a park -- which some call the "Hands Park." It is a small triangular area of some 2.7 acres, dating back to a hundred years if not

more. In one corner stands the superbly proportioned, single-storied, octagonal-domed structure of the Society of Arts and Literature. The Public Library is next to it.

Disdain for our public institutions has led to its poor image and utilisation, but with innovative leadership this may change. Next to it is the Muslim Hall -- an auditorium for some 1000 people. It is widely used for cultural events -- music, dances, dramas of local, regional, national and international status. The hall also stages public discourses and discussions of socio-political interest. It is the meeting ground of the scholarly and the novice, and everyone in between.

Next to the auditorium is the

Studio Theatre -- a small inexpensive venue to host movie festivals, book launchings and occasionally to remember those who made their mark in society. With some financial support the facilities could be made more comfortable.

In the other corner of the triangle is "Bose Brothers," a sweatmeat cum teashop, which is more than a shop. It is the meeting ground or Adda khana of the many who had dreams for this country and its people. The shop sign, visible from the road junction, evokes a vivid mental image of the node. One that persists long after one has passed the corner, just as had been described by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City*.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to explain to builders and devel-

opment partners why it is vital to preserve these images of a city. The only exception to all these cultural spaces is the odd shops engulfing the mosque -- one that could have been elsewhere.

Sub-soil drilling and piling is going on in the central open area of the once upon a time park surrounded by all the cultural spaces mentioned above. A Mela is going on to sell shop spaces for electrical and electronic goods that are to be housed in this Police Plaza.

But before I delve into this new multi-storeyed commercial building, I would like to note what lies across the street. One is the Theatre Institute, which is the hub of theatre activities, art exhibitions, photography exhibitions and other cultural performances. But the most significant edifice is the Shaheed Minar -- a symbol of our freedom and independence. Citizens congregate here and often have to spill over into the street to express collective feelings of solidarity that is so vital in a free society.

In constructing the Police Plaza

history has been erased. Standing on the southern side of the open space was an octagonal gazebo built to commemorate the victory of the British Indian policemen who died in the armed struggle against Surja Sen, Zamindar R.K.Ghosh, who was one of the jurors in the Surja Sen trial, gifted the open space to the then police force for recreational use.

This generous act was a demonstration of allegiance to the British and was definitely against our nationhood at that point of time. But now it is a part of our history. The struggle led by Surja Sen between 1930-34 eventually led to the Quit India movement, and Chittagong was making history across the continent.

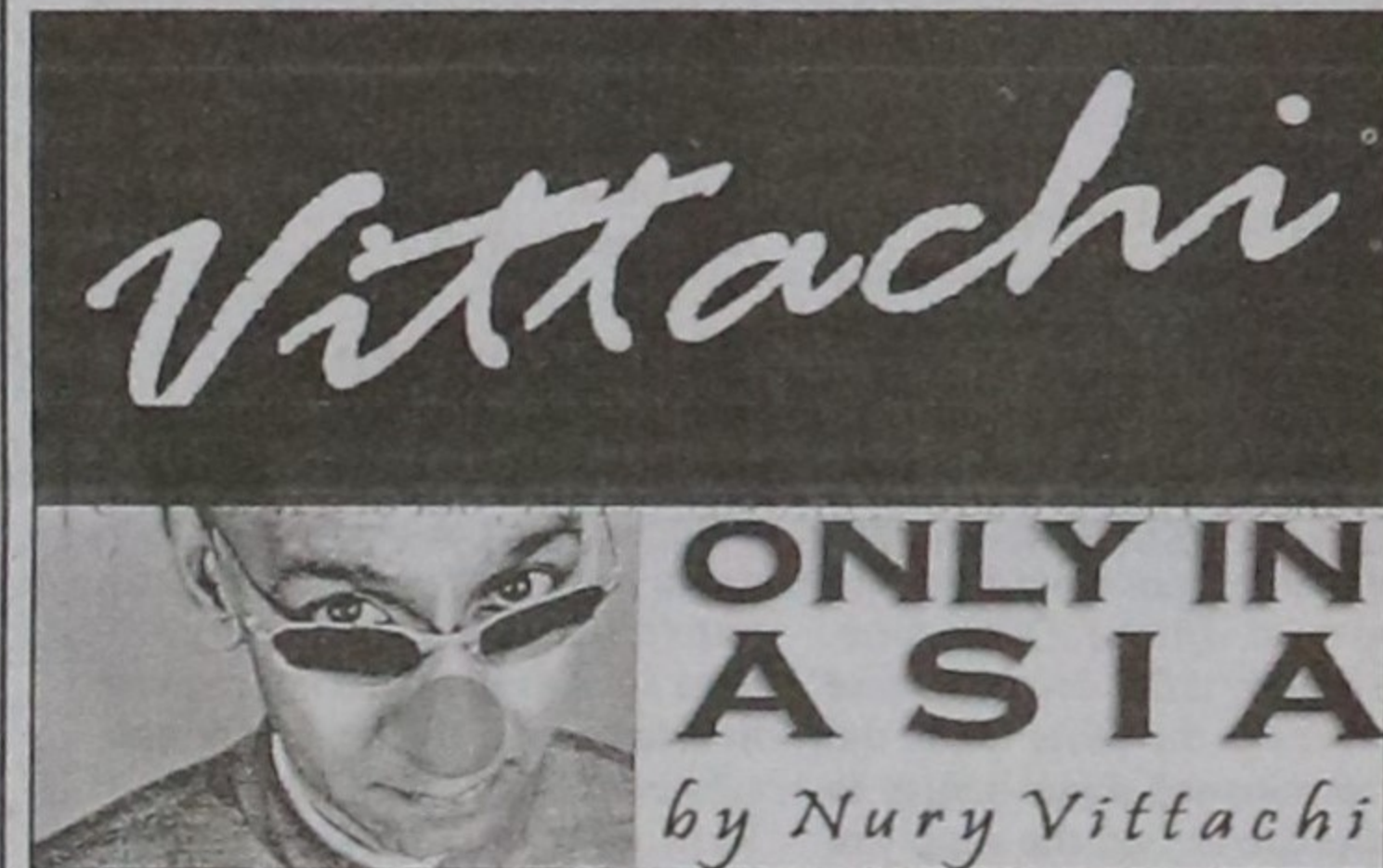
Thus, the above-mentioned site with the octagonal gazebo should have been a conservation site. Some facilities for the police may have been designed which would have enhanced the historic value. Architectural talent could have been engaged to prepare a site-sensitive design for consideration

by designers and builders. The city and the owners could all be gainers. But sadly this is not to be! Must all urban spaces be allowed to be built-up for maximum profit? An electronic market in the middle of cultural spaces?

When the local plan recommends that this space be left primarily open, not only for cultural reasons but also for urban sustainability (reduce traffic generation, reserve soft surfaces in an area surrounded by higher elevation), isn't it an irony that in the midst of all these cultural spaces the most conspicuous and pompous structure should be an electronic market?

Whose responsibility is it to determine the use of such sensitive urban land, if not all land? We wait for the day when citizens can have a say in shaping their cities, and when professional judgments are considered. Till such time, who should we look to for an answer?

Zarina Hossain is an Architect and Urban Planner.



Airport officials recapture the red tape top spot

HERE at the records office of the Ministry of Unreasonable Officials we are happy to announce that employees in the airport sector have once again grabbed the coveted top spot.

This follows a period when civil servants threatened to take over as the dumbest breed of red tape dispensers, thanks to officials from India and Malaysia who declared living people dead and refused to revise their paperwork, despite having the "corpses" standing in from of them asking politely for their status as deceased persons to be reviewed.

The airline sector's winning team earlier this month prevented a man from boarding a plane at Heathrow airport in London because he was wearing a T-shirt with a picture of a man with a gun. Brad Jayakody's garment had an image from the action film *Transformers*. Well done, Heathrow officials: that was an impressive entry.

In runner-up position came an Indian airport official. He confiscated a mango from a passenger "for security reasons" before allowing him to board a domestic flight in that country. The passenger told me: "Maybe they thought I would hijack the plane by threatening to squish it on the pilot's nice uniform!"

Numerous people shared stories of airport security officials swooping on women for the crime of wearing underwired bras. Just a little note to guards: if a woman needs tempered steel to reinforce the underside of her brassiere, there is unlikely to be much room in the garment for extraneous objects.

And in the United States, airport officials prevented a person from boarding an aircraft with a MacBook Air, the new super-thin computer from Apple. They didn't believe such a slim object could be a real computer.

An e-mailer who signs himself "Frequent Traveler" asked a question: "Many airports now have No Joking signs at security areas, and there have been several cases of quick-witted wags who have been arrested and even jailed for telling jokes. How do they square this with their constitutions, which guarantee free speech? And why haven't you been arrested?"

The only answer to your first question, Frequent Traveller, is a hollow laugh.

As for the second, I pretend to be deaf and dumb.

As well as the No Joking Zones at airports, there are secret No Joking Zones at newspapers and other media offices all over Asia. Think about it. While this newspaper fearlessly prints these attempts at humour, do its rivals regularly print anything remotely funny? No? There you go.

Now I wouldn't want airport officials to think that I am calling them dense, humourless ill-informed automatons, just because I am.

No. I fully accept the fact that airline passengers can be even dumber.

The Asian press reported last week that a record number of female pilots are well on their way to taking the controls of aircraft at major airlines in the region.

This is great news, but I know Asian businessmen will be at least as sexist as their western counterparts.

I will never forget a story I heard of a European pilot named Helga, who overheard a male passenger commenting as she entered the cockpit. "Is that a woman I see going in there?" he asked.

The flight attendant nodded. The man added: "Well, I suppose it's all right, as long as they don't let her touch anything."

Our columnist may not realise his website is also a joke zone. www.vittachi.com