

What do Bangladeshis watch on TV?



A.K. ENAMUL HAQUE



If in 2007, you had asked television station owners in Singapore, Taiwan and India, they would talk about IPTV, Mobile TV, their increasing potential and how they were making traditional media rates cheaper. Bangladesh is still not mature enough to start talking about those. We are still trying to bring cable television to the homes of 150 million people.

Only 25% of the population had access to cell-phones, according to a survey in July last year, and 7% had access to the internet. In this article, we look at the kind of programs people appreciate on television.

The adoration of the drama persists, and the channels showing local "pop-rural culture" seem to be gaining larger market shares. If one is traveling, one can see these same *natoks* on DVDs, which are ubiquitous. If you are a frequent traveler, you may find you are watching the same characters in the same set-ups again and again, only the title may have changed!

Gone are the days of BTV's romances or portrayals of classical literature. The local television channels that are most likely to gain market share are those that show comical socio-political plots. Why? Apparently, the viewers love to follow the plight of new faces such as Mosharraf Karim and Chanchal Chowdhury, desperately in love and fighting against village *murubbis*. If the plot is sensational and has music, people will get hooked.

The most regularly watched television show in the country, in January 2009, was *Khude Gaan Raaj* (53% cable viewers), a reality show that seeks out the best singers among school-going children and toddlers.

Here's a summary of the very latest study done across 2000 households in rural and urban Bangladesh by a communication analysis firm, Media Arts & Technology Research.

The respondents were asked to state what programs they most liked in 2008. Nearly 19% mentioned dramas on any channel, followed by news (17%). Please note, they refrained from

specifying a particular name or channel. But 11% mentioned a specific program in 2008 that they most liked, the children's musical talent show *Khude Gaan Raaj*, far surpassing a more established youth talent hunt platform, *Closeup 1* (8%).

The political debate program, *Tritiya Matra*, received 6% of the pie, and agriculture related documentary type programs got a little over 5%. Even with its legendary status and the benefit of a terrestrial platform, *Ittyadi*, the fun magazine show, got only 3%.

Since dramas are so appealing, the next survey question was, which dramas did you most enjoy in 2008? Over 16% singled out *Housefull* (Ntv), 11% mentioned *Shapnochura* (Banglavision). *Tolpar* (Channel i) and 420 (Channel i) got over 10% each. Close contenders were *Amader Nurul Huda*, *Ronger Manush*, *Lal Neel Beguni*, *Vober Haat*, and *Ghor Kutum*, were next. Third tier preferences went for *Gulshan Avenue*, *Byasto Dactar*, and *Aim in Life*.

If we add up the most popular mentions

regarding dramas, the television channels pie will look like this.

Another point of the survey was to find out who were the most popular TV personalities in 2008. The most votes were for Zahid Hassan. Surprisingly, Mosharraf Korim and Chanchal Chowdhury -- who were the leads of most popular dramas as well -- earned second position. The female faces at par with their popularity are Aupee Karim and Tisha.

In the second tier, we have new music sensations Balaam and Habib neck and neck, sharing their glory with legendary actress Shubarna Mustafa, who was visible in a talent hunt show as judge and also in a popular daily soap style production.

In the third tier are Bipasha Hayat, singer Asif, news anchor Mishu Rahman, singer Andrew Kishore and actor Asaduzzaman Noor.

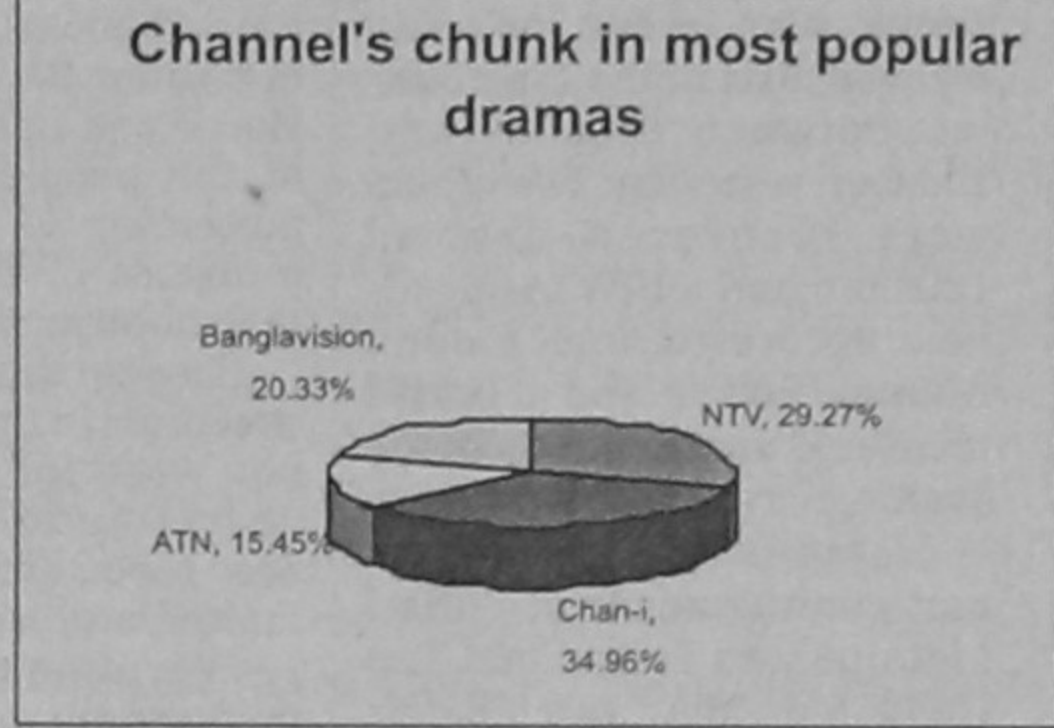
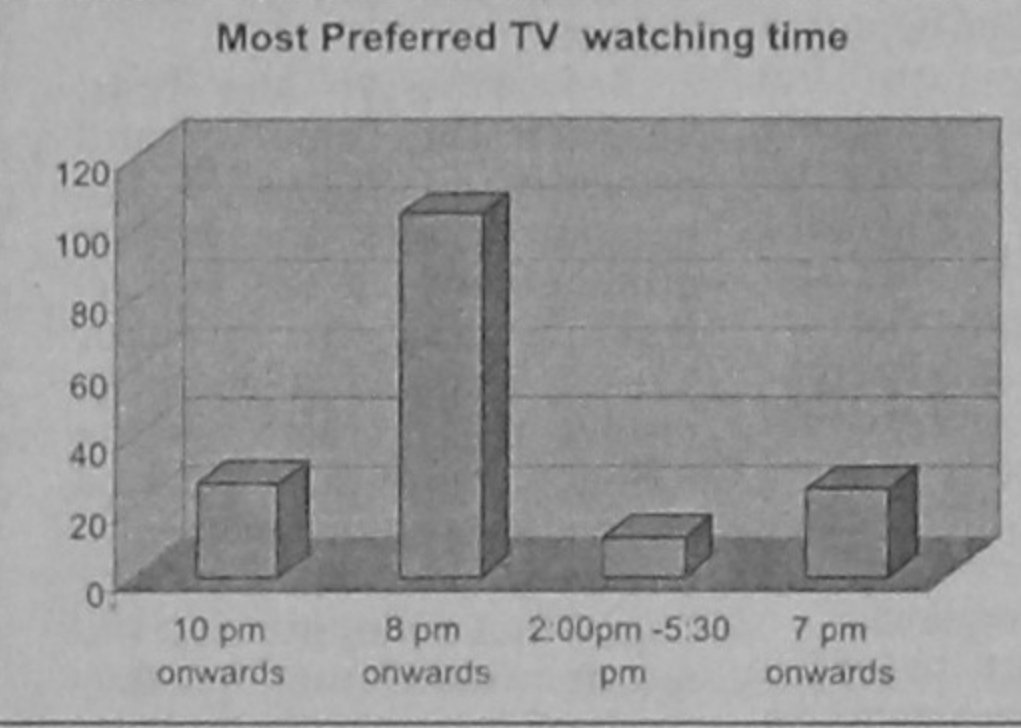
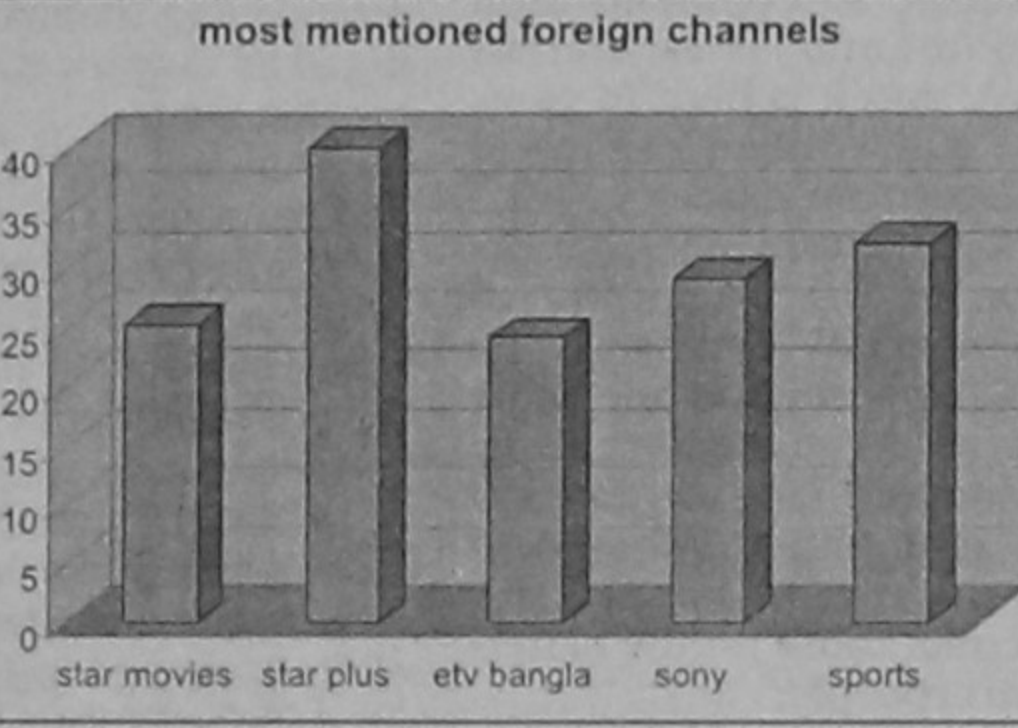
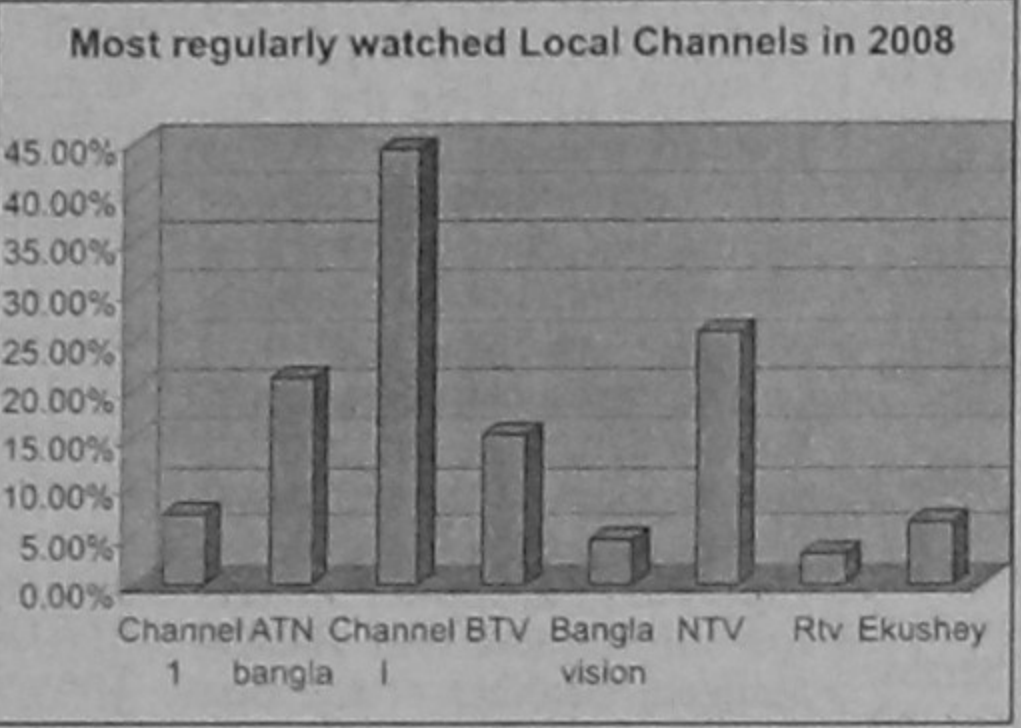
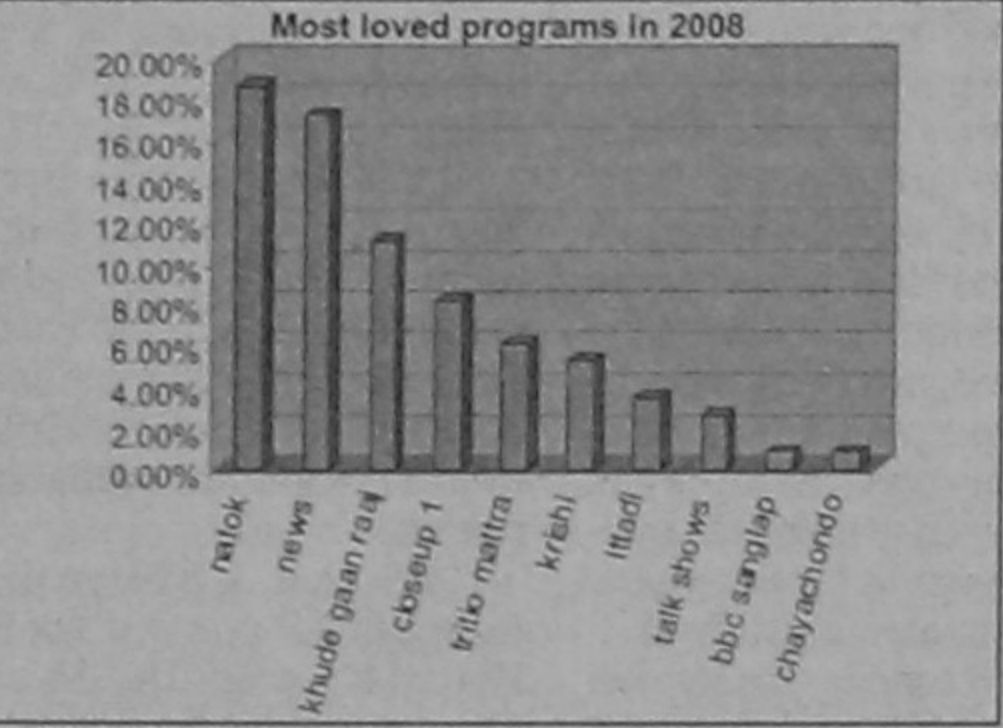
Analyse this and you will see how Bangladeshi TV audiences are welcoming new talent, hence the popularity of certain channels who realise this and are designing programs according to the

liking of the audience.

The mix of socio-political comedies and daily soap style drama are most preferred by audiences, and these are most seen in Channel i and NTV. The most watched musical talent shows are aired by them. Yet the most hated feature mentioned by the respondents -- too many advertisements -- is also seen in these two channels. Surely audiences don't mind the clutter, if they are given the programs they demand.

Interestingly, the most preferred watching time is from 8 pm onwards, when the most lucrative competition from foreign channels available in Bangladesh also kick in. Many respondents are also fans of Star Plus, Sony, sports channels, and Hollywood movies. With such glamorous competition, if our little tykes with microphones were successful in stealing audiences, even more so than the regular talent hunt shows, last year's deshi programming definitely gives us food for thought.

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The political economy of privatisation

There are compelling reasons for Bangladesh to expedite the process of privatisation of state-owned enterprises. However, it should be based on a well-conceived plan of action which should take into account the nature of the enterprises and potential impact of privatization on economic efficiency, income distribution and government budget.

MIRZA AZIZUL ISLAM

PRIVATISATION of state-owned enterprises is an important item on the policy agenda of many countries. This is because of an ideological shift in perception of the role of the state vis-à-vis the role of the private sector in economic management as well as appreciation of the economic logic buttressed by inefficiency of SOEs.

US President Reagan and UK Prime Minister Thatcher, who believed in getting the government off the back of business, contributed to an ideological shift in the perception of the role of the state. Nearly simultaneously, the role of private sector as the engine of economic growth was embodied in the "Washington Consensus."

In the developing world, many of the leaders who fought for and assumed power at independence had strong socialist orientation. They were followed by leaders who were much more receptive to the role of the private sector in economic development, and who reduced the role of the state. This ideological shift was complemented by empirical experience.

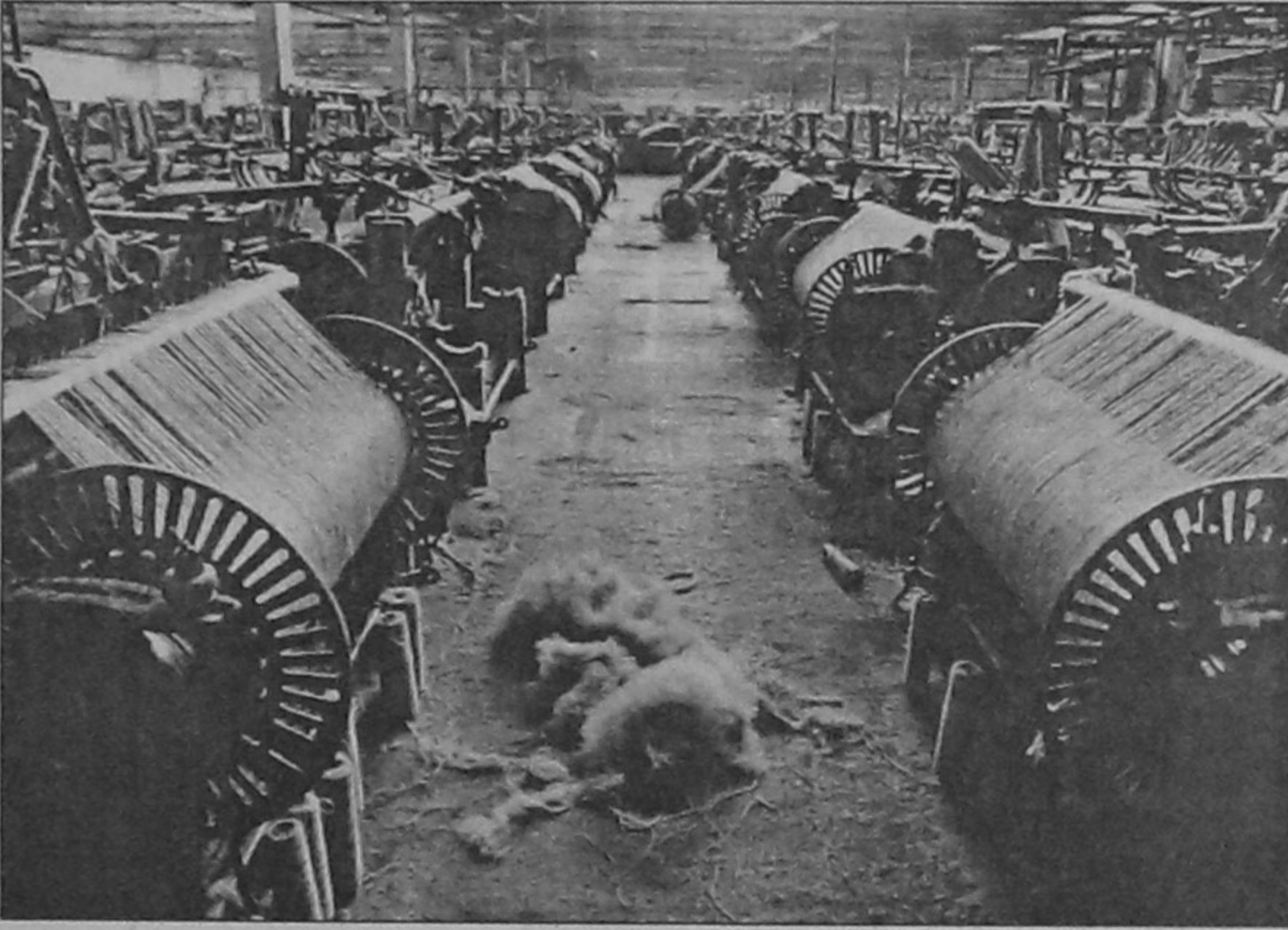
The countries belonging to former USSR, and other COMECON countries, decayed under a socialist regime dominated by SOEs. At the same time, China, Vietnam, and Asian tigers were achieving newer heights in economic development driven largely by the private sector. These factors brought about a shift in ideology regarding the roles of the state and private sector in economic development.

Economic logic

Why is privatisation necessary on economic grounds? First, SOEs typically perform miserably in terms of efficiency. Why is it that the SOEs tend to be inefficient? Because the incentive structure generated or inherent in SOEs is not conducive to efficiency, and because of what is termed in economics as "principal-agent problem."

In the private sector, the principals are the owners or the shareholders, and the agents are the management. The management is fully accountable to the shareholders and, subject to the replacement in case they fail to perform.

In the SOEs, we don't have that kind of problem that solves itself. The owners, theoretically, are the people of the country. Obviously, they can't exercise control on



Is privatisation the answer for the ailing jute industry?

a regular basis over any particular enterprise, either directly or through their elected representatives.

The next level is the concerned ministry, which, in a sense, represents the owners. Why should the officials of the ministry care if the enterprises fail to perform satisfactorily? They will neither be rewarded if the enterprises perform well, nor be punished in the event of failure, and the perks they enjoy are usually unrelated to performance. This applies to the enterprise officials as well.

The other stakeholders are the workers who, with assured pay and job security, are not particularly anxious to improve efficiency. The combination of these adverse incentives leads to inefficient operation of SOEs, as well as opposition to privatisation by these interest

groups.

Such inefficiency causes huge financial losses, which have to be financed. Governments are either forced to impose higher taxes or go for deficit financing, which has other adverse implications.

Second, perhaps the reason why many argue against privatisation is that SOEs serve some equity considerations. There is the presumption that goods and services have to be provided to the people at affordable prices and, therefore, even if an enterprise runs at loss, it should continue to function under state ownership. But the benefits are largely appropriated by the rich, rather than the poor. Therefore, this justification for maintaining SOEs is very weak.

Third, what prompted the establish-

ment of SOEs in earlier days was that, in the immediate post-independence years in most developing countries, the private sector was either unwilling or unable to undertake many activities that required heavy investment. But that situation has also dramatically changed. Today, we have many entrepreneurs who are willing to assume risk and able to undertake activities in areas where the state sector was dominant.

Bangladesh scene

Before independence, most large enterprises were owned by Pakistanis. The government took over these establishments after independence, and adopted a nationalisation program leading to a sizable expansion of government ownership.

Soon thereafter, successive governments supported privatisation, as reflected in the establishment of Disinvestment Board in 1974, Privatisation Board in 1993, Privatisation Commission in 2000, and in some industrial policies. The compelling need for expediting the process is vindicated by the losses of SOEs, amounting to Tk. 21,210 crores over the period FY99-00 to FY07-08. Debt Service Liability of these enterprises, as of June 30, 2008, amounted to Tk. 66,553 crores (SOEs receive loans at a subsidised interest rate). Their dues to banks, as of February 15, 2008, reached Tk. 16,749 crores. And they received Tk. 3,536 crores as subsidy during the period FY00-01 to FY07-08.

However, privatisation is not a panacea, and we should pursue it on the basis of a well-conceived plan. We need to determine carefully which sectors we should

privatise. It may not be desirable to privatise some of the entities in some transportation/service activities with strong positive externalities. Once we do that, we need to sequence them properly. There are limitations that will not permit all enterprises to be privatised simultaneously.

The third issue is choosing appropriate methods of privatisation, which may include anything from simple leasing to outright sales.

Fourthly, it is important that we undertake careful ex-ante impact assessment. The assessment should be done in terms of efficiency, employment, income distribution and implications for the government budget.

Fifthly, it is important that, particularly in public utilities where the market structure typically does not allow competition, an appropriate regulatory framework be put in place before privatisation in order to provide adequate safeguards against monopolistic abuse.

One complaint frequently heard is that privatisation should not be undertaken in Bangladesh because many privatised SOEs have ceased to exist, or no longer operate in the same field. To me, that does not validate the case against privatisation.

It is quite possible that the field in which an enterprise was set up was one where the country does not have an advantage and, therefore, it may be in the public interest to close it down. We must not harbour the notion that once an enterprise has been established, it has to live permanently. There is something called an exit and that exit must be planned.

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Darwin and his awards



MY adult friends can basically be divided into two lots. Those who have children and those who have decided not to. The second category is growing fast.

Am I bothered? Not a bit.

Think about it. The first group will expand. The second group will die out.

Almost exactly 200 years after the birth of Charles Darwin, a group of people in Vietnam

proved the truth of the naturalist's greatest theory: natural selection. They stole 1,000 chickens involved in a bird flu scare and took them away to eat. Guys! THINK.

I could not help but be reminded of the hunger strike on death row at a US prison a few years ago. One of the TV commentators remarked at the time: "This seems to me to be the sort of problem that solves itself."

Then there was the thief in Sydney who stole a sack containing a live, poisonous snake. Police ended up looking for an empty bag and a corpse. A few more successful robberies like that and the criminal classes could wipe themselves out completely.

These incidents show the truth of the principle of natural selection: every generation, certain individuals helpfully remove themselves from the gene pool so that smarter people can

continue the species.

Examples of this are celebrated in an annual listing called the Darwin Awards, which started off as a bit of faxed office humour in the mid-1980s, but now can be found on the Internet and in bookshops.

Here's a real life sample. In the UK, two burglars decided to rob the home of British footballer Duncan Ferguson. This gentleman is famous for being a "hard man." Not only is he a wall of muscle, but he is a bad-tempered wall of muscle: he has numerous convictions for assault and is a jailbird.

After attempting to deprive Mr. Ferguson of household property, one of the burglars required three days of hospitalisation. I ask you, was it worth it for a used video player?

But newspaper stories you can generally trust, while the majority of Darwin Award stories

listed on the Internet are pure fantasy. That's a shame, because real life is WAY funnier than fiction.

Here's proof. One of the least believable tales in the Darwin Awards listings is the one about Lawnchair Larry, who tied balloons to a garden chair, floated up into the path of passing jumbo jets, and shot the balloons with his gun until he landed safely.

That's a TRUE story. Larry Walters, a US truck driver, DID manage to use a garden chair and some weather balloons to get some five kilometres into the air stream heading to Los Angeles airport, and survived the experience by popping the balloons with a gun.

Sad to say, a recent attempt to recreate that ride came to a sad end. A priest in Brazil ascended into the sky in a chair tied to balloons

last year. But he did it close to the coast. Strong winds blew him out over the ocean. He phoned rescuers for help, but was unable to tell them where he was, as there are no landmarks in the open sea. His body was washed up a few days later.

Darwin Awards judge Wendy Northcutt gave the priest, Adelir Antonio de Carli, a double award.

"Catholic priests take vows of celibacy. Since they voluntarily remove themselves from the gene pool, the entire group earns a mass Darwin Award," she said. "Adelir Antonio wins twice over."

Meanwhile, if cut-price frozen chicken shows up in your supermarket imported from Vietnam, think of your genes.