

A tale of two power plants

Do the technocrats, bureaucrats and the political leaders, for whose negligence and inefficiency the two power projects at Sylhet and Chandpur and other planned generating units got delayed, now realise what harm they have done to the country and its people?

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PRIME Minister Sheikh Hasina laid the foundation of a 150 MW combined cycle power plant at Chandpur on April 25. The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) earlier approved this power project together with an identical project at Sylhet at a total cost of Tk.2,080 crore.

The story does not begin here. The two projects were initially approved by Ecne exactly nine years ago under the chairpersonship of the same prime minister during her first term. At that time the cost of the two projects was Tk.728 crore only. The projects were due to be completed by 2004. Her government failed to implement them as her term of office ended in July 2001.

Begum Khaleda Zia came to power for the second term in October 2001. Her government was in no hurry to implement the projects initiated by her political adversary and wasted three years looking for foreign assistance.

As no foreign assistance was available, it was decided that the projects would be implemented with suppliers' credit. Accordingly the projects got approval for the second time in July 2004 at an estimated cost of Tk.404 crore each.

Begum Khaleda's term of office ended in October 2006 but the projects could not see the light of the day. As no suppliers' credit could be lined up, the caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed later decided to implement the projects with its own fund. They too failed to start the construction of the projects. Finally, the onus of constructing the projects came back to Sheikh Hasina's government in January 2009.

The handling of the two projects during the nine long years by the bureaucrats and the political leadership raises several important questions. How could an elected government waste five years only looking for foreign aid or suppliers' credit without taking available alternative measures for implementation?

Could not the caretaker government start the construction of the projects during their term in office? I must add here that the present government was also slow in taking decisions

in this sector during the first year in office.

What did the delay of the projects cost to the nation? First of all, the total capital cost of the projects increased by Tk.1,352 crore (\$193 million) during the nine years. This is peanuts compared to the associated losses. Let us try to find out what 300 MW of power could do for the country, considering the garment industry as an example.

An average garment factory in Bangladesh takes a load of about 100 kW, employs 350 workers in a single shift of 10 hours per day, and exports goods worth \$3 million annually. Accordingly, 300 MW of electricity could power roughly 3,000 garment factories of the same size, employ a total of over one million workers and earn \$9 billion annually without any interruption of working hours.

An hour of interruption per day due to load shedding thus causes a net annual loss of production worth \$900 million! Every day we are now having power cuts for 3-5 hours! One can easily imagine that the total losses in terms of production for hours of load shedding per day over the years are simply colossal.

I mentioned the two power plants only as examples. As a matter of fact, a total of 3,000 MW of power should have been added to the PDB grid in the last nine years in order to make the system operate without any load shedding today.

Do the technocrats, bureaucrats and the political leaders, for whose negligence and inefficiency the two power projects at Sylhet and Chandpur and other planned generating units got delayed, now realise what harm they have done to the country and its people?

Because of the delay in the implementation of the planned power projects, the peak power demand now exceeds the available generating capacity by 2,000 MW. As a result, we have hours of load shedding during the torturous summer days, loss of production in industries, and idle man-hours in offices, commercial concerns and industrial units.

The power crisis has slowed down new investments in the economic sector. It is affecting the supply of potable water in urban areas and irrigation water in the agricultural fields. Slower investment is breeding unemployment. Add to it the frustrations of



Power plants suffering from load shedding.

the people without electricity, water and natural gas. The consequences can be catastrophic.

This is a man-made crisis to which the whole nation has become hostage. Being desperate, the government is planning to buy 500-1000 MW of rental power from foreign companies at very high costs, incurring heavy losses.

The supply of electricity, water and natural gas has become the biggest challenge for the present government. It must take up a crash program now to increase the generating capacity of the system and move very fast to build the planned power projects.

The embarrassment the present crisis is causing to the government should be no consolation to those who helped to bring it about. Do they have the moral right now to demonstrate in the streets demanding "immediate solution" to the crisis, knowing fully well that they are the real architects of the crisis that has no quick solution?

Unfortunately, this is not only a tale of two power plants only but also a sad story of

sabotage against the economy of the country and the well-being of its people. Electricity is one of the major driving forces of the economy of any country. If the supply of electricity is interrupted, the economy of the country is paralysed.

Any attempt that impedes the implementation of a power project should be considered as a crime, like the sabotage of an electric transmission line or a generating station. If sabotage is a punishable crime, why should not the actions of the technocrats, bureaucrats or the policy makers who deliberately neglected or impeded the implementation of the power projects be also punishable?

In my opinion there should be an impartial inquiry by a high-powered body into the causes of the present power crisis, and anyone found guilty of negligence or inefficiency should be brought to justice. This will at least prevent the recurrence of similar crises in the future.

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An amazing journey from Shahid Lipi to Avro

There were three major challenges for Bangla to be written using a computer -- Bangla keyboard, software for the background processing (the main programming), and fonts to display the characters.



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LIKE many chapters of our national history, the amazing journey of digital Bangla -- from English to Bangla computing -- remains largely unknown. Conversant persons should record that history for the new generations. This article however is not an effort to write that history. Rather, I share with you how few geniuses of our time are changing the way we write Bangla on our computers.

There were three major challenges for Bangla to be written using a computer -- Bangla keyboard, software for the background processing (the main programming), and fonts to display the characters.

Computer keyboards inherited the QWERTY layout (placement of alphabets on keyboard) from typewriters, which were developed in 1874. So instead of inventing a Bangla keyboard altogether, all we needed for Bangla typing was to determine where to place Bangla

alphabets on an English keyboard -- be it for typewriter or computer.

In 1965, Munir Chowdhury developed a Bangla layout for a typewriter's QWERTY keyboard to reduce jamming of type-bars and increase the typing speed. This was the first scientific Bangla layout. It was later used in computer keyboards.

But for a computer, having a keyboard "layout" is not enough. We needed software that could process the meaning of the pressed Bangla-labelled key, and fonts-set that could show the Bangla alphabets on the computer screen.

Though there were a number of individual initiatives, "Shahid Lipi" was the forerunner of first-generation Bangla solutions and the first complete Bangla computing interface. Saif Shahid began working on this in 1983 and a complete Macintosh-based version appeared in the market in 1985. He provided a set of Bangla fonts and also offered a Bangla layout, different from the one developed by Munir

Chowdhury.

A number of second-generation Bangla solutions hit the market by the end of 1990s. Bijoy, Proshika-shobdo and Proberton led this campaign. While most of them offered unique keyboard layouts, many did not follow the required level of research that Bangla key layout needed.

Since memorising different layouts can hinder the acceptance of new software and make typing complex, some suggested the use of the Munir layout as a basis for further development of Bangla layouts. Later on, Bangladesh Computer Council standardised this layout in National (Jatiya) keyboard layout.

However, continuity and compatibility remained a major problem for many of these second-generation solutions. Mustafa Jabbar addressed this issue by offering long-term entrepreneurial support through Ananda Computers, which hosted a bright team of software developers.

The first version of Bijoy "software" was developed in India (possibly by an Indian programmer). Subsequent versions were developed in Bangladesh by Ananda Computers' team of talented developers including Munirul Abedin Pappana who worked for Bijoy 5.0, popularly known as Bijoy 2000.

From the beginning Mustafa Jabbar provided a different layout for the software, now known as Bijoy layout. Yet, Ananda Computers could easily convince users to accept another new key layout to memorise because of the strong compatibility of its software with other programs. Bijoy software (especially Bijoy 2000) at that time became the most compatible Bangla software to support available publishing software.

However, sharing Bangla texts -- over the internet or between computers -- remained a major predicament. Both parties needed to have similar set of Bangla fonts installed on their computers; otherwise the garbled texts weren't readable. Bangla writing also remained unpopular to the non-professional users who felt discouraged to memorise a complex Bangla layout.

In 1996, the software industry entered the realm of Unicode 2. Unicode -- a universal character-encoding standard that was first developed in 1987 -- allowed virtually any letter from any language of the world to be coded and used under one single standard. Unicode opened up the possibility of having Bangla software that could be used without having to think too much about the fonts.

A number of talented developers in Bangladesh began to experiment with new

Bangla software. Many were also influenced by the global Open Source campaign and created Bangla software for platforms such as Linux Mint and Ubuntu, which traditional software could not support.

Before these experiments came a number of Unicode supported software including Ekushey Shadinota and Avro. Later, some traditional software also offered Unicode versions. Though the marvel of these third-generation Bangla software was in their programming, they also wanted to make sure that no one needed to go through another painful process of memorising another keyboard layout.

So, instead of one complex layout to memorise, they included a phonetic keyboard which does not require memorising of the whole layout. For instance, to write *pau-phau-bau-bhau-mau* one just needs to type P-F-B-V-M. This generated widespread acceptance among individual users.

They also kept the traditional key layouts as an extra option for those who had already memorised them. However, to better suit Unicode and possibly to avoid other patented layouts, these optional layouts did not follow traditional layouts completely.

For instance, the optional layouts of Ekushey and Avro differ from Bijoy and National layouts in some keystrokes and on vowel grapheme. But the unique architectures of the software made it possible to run on versatile platforms (e.g. Linux) where traditional software lagged behind.

Amazingly, most of the third-generation software do not have any business motive and are offered for free. To highlight the significance of being legally free, let me share with you one anecdote.

Before the last national election, the Bangladesh Election Commission conducted the national ID card program, the largest data collection initiative ever carried out in Bangladesh. But the commission faced huge expenditure when it needed to buy licensed Bangla software for each of the thousands of computers/laptops to be used in the project. One of the lowest offers they got from a local Bangla software company amounted Tk.50 million (five crore). Mehdi Hasan Khan, the creator of Avro, let his software be used for free!

I often try to grasp how much love is needed for one's language to be so self-sacrificing. It shouldn't come as a surprise though. After all, in the past we have sacrificed lives to keep our language free.

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Unfreedom to freedom

At the end of the book, however, we find Dr. Alamgir drives us to the elements of freedom that he dreams of. The canvas that we call freedom covers socio-political and economic freedom of everyone in a particular society. It means inclusive freedom.

ABDUL BAYES

DR. Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, a former state minister and now an AL presidium member, has recently published a book, *Notes from a Prison* (UPL). It is mostly an account of the atrocities that he and other politicians had to suffer under the military-controlled government that ruled Bangladesh from January 11, 2007 till almost the end of 2008.

All that happened at that time took place under the aegis of a caretaker government headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed. The author of the book, with his evocative eloquent words and sentence construction, captured the events of that "dark" period like a novelist.

Dr. Alamgir was incarcerated from February 2, 2007 to October 20, 2008. He was picked up without any arrest warrant from his house at Banani at the dead of night: "[W]ith a bang at the door loud beyond the point of civility ... opened the door and faced six persons, one in front with a revolver in hand ... taken on board a black SUV flanked by a Lt Colonel and a Major; put a black patch over eyes despite protest."

In fact, this was how our learned colleagues from universities were also taken to the torture cells. Nowhere in the civilised world are politicians, intellectuals, and academics arrested without a warrant, blindfolded and taken to torture cells. No citizen, no matter what the level of crime he or she has committed, can be captured like this.

Anyone can commit a crime, advertently or inadvertently, but justice demands that due process should follow the investigations. All that the caretaker government did in the name of uprooting corruption at that time amounts to a violation of human rights, persecution of politicians and more importantly, a depoliticisation of the society.

We should never forget that the process of trial is more important than the outcome of the trial itself. No innocent person should be punished even if one hundred culprits get away unpunished. Following the wrong policy of the then government, many of the "corrupt" persons -- as perceived by the public if not proved by documents -- have gained the courage to try to weaken the drive against corruption.

The writer of the book theorises that his arrest could be due to two main reasons: First, he opposed the takeover by the quasi-military government. Second, he publicly opposed the sale of Rupali Bank to a Saudi prince.

I have known Dr. Alamgir for quite a long time. To me he is an academic, amiable, altruistic, and argumentative person. Even his staunchest critics never questioned his honesty, sincerity, and diligence. It is thus no wonder that I was shocked to know that Alamgir was charged with corruption. Prominent personalities like A.M.A. Muhiith, Akbar Ali Khan, Forrest Cookson, and Abul Barakat placed their positive views about him in the court at that time. But all was in vain.

As I mentioned before, the book is about the tales of torture on politicians by an unelected government. It also contains a few interesting notes on interactions with his political arch-rival inmates in jail-life.

At the end of the book, however, we find Dr. Alamgir drives us to the elements of freedom that he dreams of. The canvas that we call freedom covers socio-political and economic freedom of everyone in a particular society. It means inclusive freedom.

It is our view that Bangladesh has performed appreciably well on some of the economic and social fronts but it is yet yearning for political freedom. Elected or unelected, successive governments have inflicted oppression and torture on their opponents.

The ruling party cadres forfeit freedom of economic and political agency -- from toll collections in local markets to capturing seats in dormitories. Dr. Alamgir laments over the lack of freedom in Bangladesh. But the good news is that he appears to be determined to drive freedom home:

"As the procession of people took me out of the prison-hospital, I counted not many of these freedoms we attained thus far. The elements of unfreedom, backwardness, feudal conduct, lordly mannerism and at the top of all, ignoring others for the self, stood in our way. Encouraged by the chanting slogans of thousands, I committed myself to freedom for whatever years of life were left for me."

Now that Dr. Alamgir's party is in power and he is also holding an important position in the party as well as in the parliament, we can only expect that freedom in Bangladesh will witness fair weather never intercepted by the guns or the goons; that rough weather arising out of extortion, corruption, attack on minorities, eve-teasing, rape, murder, looting, etc would not be allowed to rock the boat of freedom.

Let it be the last book in Bangladesh on unfreedom to freedom.

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