

Getting old vehicles off the streets

Good move, but let it be done in phases

THE authorities plan to launch a drive against old vehicles and fake driving licences in the city from July 15. We certainly commend the move, though we cannot stay away from reminding the government that similar moves were earlier announced as well, with much fanfare, before things went back to square one. Let matters be a little different this time and in a way that takes certain important factors into consideration. Clearly the biggest factor here relates to citizens' comfort while commuting or trying to commute. The government's plans to crack down on 20-year-old buses and 25-year-old trucks, from such a point of view, should be looked at carefully. Much as we would like to see ageing vehicles taken off the streets, we also feel that nothing should be done that will leave commuters without transport all of a sudden. One can well imagine the chaos that will ensue if on July 15 and on the days following, citizens wake up to a nightmare of having to fend for themselves without transport.

Our point is therefore simple. Let the move against ageing vehicles not be overly dramatised, for that might cause more problems than it can solve. No one argues that the many dilapidated buses and other forms of transport we see regularly on Dhaka streets must stay. They have to go. The important point here, though, is that these vehicles should be phased out instead of being put out of action at one go. In other words, action against such vehicles must not come to a point where citizens suffer. More specifically, the authorities must ensure that as these dilapidated buses and similar vehicles are phased out, they are replaced by new ones or alternative means of transport. There is another point we can make here, which is that the government can make arrangements for a provision of bank loans to those whose vehicles are ordered off the streets. The vehicles they now own are their sources of income, which is as much as to say that if they are not encouraged to invest in new vehicles, they will be in a state of jeopardy. One other point must not be missed. Not all 20- or 25-year-old vehicles might be less than road worthy. At issue here is not the age but the condition of the vehicles. The authorities must therefore examine these one lakh vehicles to find out how many of them can still be used as transport.

Finally, we think that the decision to rid the roads of vehicles that do not conform to accepted standards is a good one. For reasons of safety and prevention of pollution, it is important that any vehicle which is a danger to public health be removed. Let the job be done with judiciousness. And let it not end up as a non-starter once again.

Alleviating beggary is a pressing task

Time to do something about it on a sustainable basis

STREET beggary, particularly at the city's traffic intersections, has acquired an ungainly ubiquity. It's hazardous for those who practise it along assorted transports pulling up at a signal point and then rushing out when given green light. Children and women are among the most vulnerable. It is also visibly self-degrading as a crippled hand or leg or a blind eye is called attention to by tapping on the window panes, or if these panes are open show it to appeal to the sense of piety of the vehicle passengers. Some of them look the other way, some handing in a small amount.

How much of this begging is unavoidable, and how much habitual and addictive is an interesting matter for sociological study that has hardly received any priority attention. We do not even have any survey of how many beggars there are, what is the rate of their annual increase when driven by rural landlessness and pauperisation. That is where the reversal process should begin by developing growth epicentres to hold the local people to their domicile.

But so casual has been the approach to the problem that often rag to riches stories are spun out to romanticise beggary as an organised and lucrative profession, far too entrenched to be surgically eliminated.

We don't buy into such morbid thinking; for, in our assessment, by allowing beggary to proliferate the way it has, we have only reflected our collective sense of poor self-esteem thereby letting our national image to be demeaned.

In this overall context, it's wee bit good to know that the government has proposed an allocation of Tk. 6.32 crore to undertake a project for rehabilitating beggars by offering them employment, education, training and shelter. This is just a drop in the ocean, but a start all the same which must be built on with far greater allocation of resources for implementing a comprehensive sheltering plan including providing skill and seed money to get started on self-help or co-operative basis. Let it not end the way of relocating them away from the city only to see them return to the streets.

CTG MAYORAL ELECTION

The hype and the reality

The reality on ground is that attempts at devolution of authority to local bodies have been frustrated on account of the instability of the national government. In fact in out situation, major changes of government characterised by long authoritarian rule, punctuated by spells of democratisation have not helped the growth of an ethos favourable to the nurturing of local government institutions.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE extra enthusiasm witnessed before and after the recent mayoral election of the so-called commercial capital of Bangladesh does not come as a surprise for those that are aware of our political culture. What perhaps had struck many is that an intensely political personality has been humbled at the hustings by a not-so-politically committed person. That may or may not be a significant development in our situation particularly the electoral politics but the reality is that despite disclaimers from the two main political parties mayoral election has in effect, been contested on a political party basis.

The question under the circumstances is, are local bodies' election very important in so far as it impacts the governance scenario and the socio-economic development? Alternatively, can we really achieve substantive democratic governance with-

out adequately empowering the local elected institutions? Such queries and apprehensions acquire relevance in our polity wherein there is a noticeable deviation or departure from the earlier electoral pronouncements to effectively strengthen local government.

In trying to see things in perspective, it would be relevant to comment that public administration in our environment takes place in a setting where political power struggles blur the vision of administrators. Born out of colonial traditions and trying to respond to the demands of changed circumstances and times, administrative systems encounter tremendous pressures. The system has been used to further narrow interests of the rulers and privileged groups and as a result the public is alienated from the administration.

While our local bodies enjoy a degree of operational autonomy they are in no way independent of the national government of

the country. There are a number of areas of interaction between a local body and the government which cover legal, operational and financial matters as well as control and supervision by the government.

The local body's territorial jurisdiction, the functions it can perform and the taxes it can impose, are all determined by national legislations. Its basic features are carved by such legislation and additionally its activities are also guided and supervised by departments of the national government. Therefore, there is clearly a patron-client relationship between the national government and the local government.

The national government retains the power to give directions to local bodies. In exercise of this power, the national government issues circulars and directives on various aspects to the local government bodies. Apart from the general powers of legislation, rule making, regulation, approval and giving directions, there are also specific instruments of control in the hands of the national government.

The national government prescribes to the local bodies administrative details relating to various departments and the types and registers and forms that they should maintain in their administrative operations. The government also issues circulars and directives by means of which it indicates the policy that local bodies have to follow.

The reality on ground is that attempts at devolution of authority to local bodies have

been frustrated on account of the instability of the national government. In fact in out situation, major changes of government characterised by long authoritarian rule, punctuated by spells of democratisation have not helped the growth of an ethos favourable to the nurturing of local government institutions.

Unfortunately, with the change of government the policy on local government also kept changing. Such change, it is alleged was generally dictated by the imperative of legitimising and broadening the base of power holders in the national government.

The sad commentary is that local government has not been given a chance to act as a continuing entity in Bangladesh. The national government has not effectively formulated a definite set of policies regarding local government. In our case concepts like "local self-government" and "devolution of authority" do not carry much meaning.

A mere supra-legal cover for the local bodies will not strengthen its base and functioning. There has to be a broad consensus among those in power and those aspiring to it regarding the overall political setup in the country and the role of local government bodies therein. In the long run, popular participation and social transformation will hopefully ensure growth of healthy local government.

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Saving electricity is saving money.

Increasing negawatts

He correctly identified the wrong assumption in electricity pricing based on the concept of homogeneity in character of production and supply of electricity. That this was a wrong assumption to start with needs further explanation.

M. SHAMSUL HAQUE

THE Daily Star's op-ed on the power sector by Dr. F.K. Khan (June 16) covered all aspects of the topic. The paper explained that the recent shortages were because of our dependence on one source -- natural gas -- only. At one time natural gas it was thought that the gas would last 20-30 years.

That agriculture would come up as a major user of electricity was not properly weighted, nor were mega shopping malls and the rapid growth of the textile industry. Dr. Khan also covered the regional situation and mentioned India's dependence on coal as a single source. Although there are sufficient reserves there was a shortage of 5% a year, hence India also is faced with short supply of electricity.

The recently concluded agreement between India and Bangladesh, where India offered to sell 250 MW of electricity, may not be forthcoming in the near term. Dr. Khan also mentioned negawatts (NW), a term indicating saving electricity in some ways and supplying it to others. The distribution of free CFL bulbs is an example of NW, as it will result in saving of electricity.

The article raised the issue of differential pricing of electricity according to peak time use and affordability. He correctly identified the wrong assumption in electricity pricing based on the concept of homogeneity in character of production and supply of electricity. That this was a wrong assumption to start with needs further explanation.

Not many products and services, even rice, can be called homogenous. For example, people use transport vehicles of different sizes and costs to move from one place to another. Rich people who can afford expensive vehicles use them regularly and spend Tk.10-15 per km for fuel, whereas others are happy to buy reconditioned cars for Tk.5-15 lac and spend Tk.3-5 per km. We may not cite the use of buses and trains by common people as other examples.

The example of supermarkets and mega malls with a/c facilities is also relevant here. A World Bank study on the subject identified the issue of inequity in electricity pricing and said that the poor people paid higher charges than the rich in cities. The basics of economics say that demand is a function of price. We have always considered electricity price increases in general

for all users, and found that it was not acceptable to the users given the poor state of supply.

Now that there is absolute shortage, because of which we are forced to generate electricity at much higher costs from rental and smaller power plants using imported fuel, the rationale for charging higher prices from those who can afford is very strong. As a result, if demand is reduced it will add to NWs and the cross-subsidisation of the poorer people, especially farmers, by the richer urban people would be a welcome change.

It would not be politically unacceptable also as people in larger numbers will be benefited. In the USA, when gasoline prices reached \$4 per gallon in 2008, mileage driven by the motorists fell by several billion miles, use of gas-guzzlers decreased, and people started making using alternative transport.

On the other hand, the people in the urban sector will move to install solar panels at a much faster rate. That will add to the NWs in national grids. Already, many small shop/factory owners are using generators to produce electricity. It seems the use of solar energy will be the ultimate source of electricity in the long run as technology improves and cost of panels is reduced.

There may be some scope for generation from small hydro-plants. At the moment it does not hold much prospect. Regional sources, as mentioned in Dr. Khan's article, may be available in the future if Saarc countries cooperate in bringing changes in their policies. That is not likely to happen in the

next two/three years.

Dr. Khan has urged for research to be done on some of the issues he raised in his piece. That is, of course, a necessity to move ahead in this field. We may have additional reserves of natural gas, but gas has more productive use in production of chemical fertilisers needed to increase agricultural production.

The debate on coal mining technology and its use for domestic production of electricity should be brought to an end as soon as possible through research and dialogue with concerned parties. There must be a solution that is mutually beneficial to all the parties.

Managing demand through rational pricing policies and giving incentives for solar energy appear to be most useful strategies to follow in the short and mid-terms. We have moved to a relatively higher cost of electricity production and supply. That makes pricing policies even more important to ensure supply and equity among the competing sources of demand, with priority sectors such as agriculture being adequately subsidised.

It needs to be emphasised that delay in actions in the power sector has already caused tremendous loss in production and created uncertainty for new investment in the country. We must catch up in all respects to restore the desired balance needed for faster economic growth and reduction of poverty.

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