

Revive the railways

Government inertia is self-defeating

THE government's sluggishness with regard to revitalising the Bangladesh Railway (BR) is deplorable to say the least. Our railway system is the most potential yet the most neglected sector in the country. Not only has not a single kilometer of new track been added to the nearly 3000 kilometer tracks that we inherited during partition, if anything the railway network has shrunk, and currently only 30 per cent of the total surface area is covered by railways in the country.

Given the population increase and the consequent rise in passenger traffic, the government must develop all the available modes of communication allowing greater option to commuters. But the state of disrepair the BR is in has to be addressed urgently.

The railway happens to be the principal mode of transport in the country but has been gradually edged out by the road sector, where the bulk of development expenditure for the transport sector has gone. Over the last two decades road communication has become the more preferred option for travelers for variety of reasons. But, in spite of that and the existing lacunae in the railway system, 64 million people used the railways in 2009, compared to 53.8 million in 2008 an increase of one million passengers.

Given the foregoing it is quite unbelievable that plans to resuscitate the ailing system, taken up in Feb 2007, continue to be hamstrung by the foot dragging of the concerned ministries, primarily because no one wants to let go of their control over the BR. When the donors have pledged the required sum, reportedly for the first time multilateral donors have pledged such a huge sum for this sector, and have already released a tranche of 130 million USD out of the pledged 730 million USD, it seems absurd that the restoration plans would remain stuck up because the promised reform of the railways, precondition for the loan, has not been initiated as yet. And the files have been moving to and fro, between the ministries and the BR HQ for the last several years. There should be a limit to bureaucratic wrangling.

Given the compulsions to revive the railways without delay, the communications ministry must move fast. We take note of the communications minister's remarks that papers are all but ready and the changes will be made effective soon. But the internal dissensions between the ministries of finance and communications, as to how the management structure should be, do not send out the right signals.

Frankly, the time spent on the railway reform project, on which the bulk of the loan is predicated, has been inordinately lengthy, and may turn out to be self-defeating, with the possibility of the donors withdrawing their commitment if the matter is not speeded up.

Pakistan's difficult road to recovery

The world must do more for the flood-affected

PAKISTAN'S miseries go on. In the one month since floods began to ravage the country, conditions have been turning for the worse with reports of diseases and plain hunger coming in from inaccessible parts of the flood-affected regions. That, again, is a reality not to be easily averted. With more than a fifth of Pakistan now under floodwaters and with the rivers still rising because of the endless rains, it is hard to see how --- and how soon --- it can get on to the road to recovery.

Aid of the kind needed from the international community has not been coming in. Much of the reason for it being so lies of course with the inability of the Pakistan government to handle relief efforts. Of all the institutions in Pakistan, only the army has proved capable of rushing to the aid of the victims. It is Pakistan's people who need to be reassured that the global community is with them.

No fewer than 1600 people have died in the floods. As many as 20 million have been displaced. Whole villages have been swept away and crops have been destroyed. Small wonder, then, that charities run by South Asian and other communities abroad remain busy asking people for donations.

While such donations will come in handy, there is still more that the world can do as a whole. The flash appeal made by the United Nations on August 9 for \$ 500 million in aid to Pakistan has not had much of an impact, or so it seems. No more than half that amount has been raised so far. What is needed at this point time is to ensure that survival kits reach the flood affected people urgently, and that all necessary measures are undertaken to prevent outbreak of large scale epidemic which automatically ensues after floods of this magnitude.

For its part Bangladesh has committed USD 2 million, but in addition, the Bangladesh government may also organise the NGOs and use their expertise and manpower to help the flood affected people of Pakistan, particularly in respect of distribution of relief and medical support.

In this respect, SAARC nations, in a regional spirit, could undertake and coordinate joint relief efforts. Pakistan's flood-affected people need to survive. Let no impediment come in the way of their rehabilitation.



Let us not forget Siddique

While we would be hoping that some generous soul would come to Siddique's rescue in recognition of the great service he has rendered unknowingly to the cause of democracy and constitutional sanctity, we still don't know how many such Siddiques, unaware of the schemes of the powerful and the crooked conspirators, are suffering in the country's jails or being harassed by the enforcers of law.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

SIDDIQUE Ahmed, a very poor village tutor, was probably teaching his pupils or was occupied with his usual household chores when the judges of the High Court were pronouncing their historic verdict on the Seventh Amendment to the Constitution that was made in an attempt to justify General Ershad's illegal usurpation of state power between 1982 and 1990.

There is also no reason why Siddique should be concerned about those big events that usually happen in the capital city. He is a man of small means and naturally has no stake in such earth-shattering events.

But the irony is that, though unbeknown to him, he has been instrumental in that landmark judgement of the High Court that declared Ershad's regime, from his extra-

constitutional seizure of power to most of the activities, including the rules and ordinances that were promulgated under his regime, as unlawful and anti-constitutional.

But though the petition lodged on his behalf in the court of law marks a departure in the country's judicial as well as political history, has it in anyway changed the history of Siddique's own life? Not in the least, at least until now. Because it was by some freak of fate that he has been at the centre of the events.

Siddique Ahmed will remain an unsung hero in the entire episode. And being a simple villager, largely unaware of the crookedness of those who are constantly lying in wait to take advantage of his naiveté, he may again have to land in the jail, unless a well-meaning person of means comes forward to help him out of the trap he fell into unknow-

ingly about a quarter century back.

For he is still a murder convict in the eye of the law, though his own version of the story, as reported in Saturday's issue of this paper, shows that he has no idea of how he got involved in this legal tangle, in the first place.

Granted he is unaware, like most of his fellow people living in the very low-income bracket, about the intricacies of law that demand that the burden of proof of his innocence rests just on his shoulder. And the law is blind in this respect, that is, about his simplicity, naiveté or ignorance of law. He will have to gather the evidence that he is completely innocent and had no hand in the charge of murder brought against him at a military tribunal during Ershad's martial law.

While we would be hoping that some generous soul would come to Siddique's rescue in recognition of the great service he has rendered unknowingly to the cause of democracy and constitutional sanctity, we still don't know how many such Siddiques, unaware of the schemes of the powerful and the crooked conspirators, are suffering in the country's jails or being harassed by the enforcers of law.

The entire course of events that led to the watershed judgement by the High Court also lay bare the level of vulnerability the majority of the non-enlightened, poor and innocent people in the rural areas are exposed to.

After the victory of the people in restoring the sanctity of the constitution, the next step would be to protect the very people whose will the constitution embodies. For the victory will lose much of its glory, if people like Siddique remain unprotected by law.

It is not only the military rulers or the big guns in politics and in power who have so far been bending the constitution and its laws to suit their own selfish ends. Violation of the constitution and abuse of its laws are regularly taking place in the corridors of the court buildings in the country. People with money and power, always find some unsuspecting victims, who never know that they are already on death row for no crime or fault on their part.

Is it not a travesty of law and justice when someone is sent to the condemned cell in a prison, in spite of her or his innocence in the case? In such a situation, can we really wholeheartedly celebrate the restoration of constitution, its inviolability and the supremacy of the people's will, when people like Siddique are still haunted by the benders of the process of justice and the law?

The judiciary and the lawyers engaged in the profession of legal practice should now turn their attention to the underdogs, who are still largely unserved and often pursued by the benders of law.

Syed Fatahul Alim is a senior journalist.

CPM's crisis deepens

The CPM faces a bleak election prospect. In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front is widely expected to lose the coming elections. Its Lok Sabha tally plummeted from 19 out of 21 in 2004 to only 4 seats last year. The LDF took no bold pro-people measures.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

WHAT the Communist Party of India (Marxist) dreaded the most in West Bengal, its bastion for 33 years, has happened. Trinamool Congress Party leader Mamata Banerjee held a well-attended rally at Lalgurha in the Jangalmahal region bordering Jharkhand, enlisted the support of the People's Committee against Police Atrocities (PCPA), and announced the end of Left "hegemony."

The CPM hoarsely attacked Ms Banerjee's "unholy" alliance with Maoists, who control a section of the PCPA. This didn't quite square up with the PCPA's publicly expressed ire with her for not articulating its demands.

Finally, the CPM was reduced to making a lame appeal to the Congress to distance itself from the TMC on the Maoist violence issue, which, it termed, like Prime Minister Singh, India's "greatest internal security threat." But Ms Banerjee had thrice appealed for non-violence at Lalgurha.

The CPM piously wishes that the Trinamool-Congress alliance, widely expected to win next year's Assembly elections, would collapse. But wishes are one thing, strategy is another. The CPM lacks a strategy to revive itself.

This was confirmed by its recent Extended Central Committee in Vijayawada -- the last plenum before the next party congress. Vijayawada didn't change the line of opposing the United Progressive Alliance's neoliberal economic policies and

foreign policy and combating the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Less charitably, General Secretary Prakash Karat manipulated the CPM into covering up apex-level failures which contributed to its rout in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

Critical here was withdrawal of support to the UPA in July 2008 over the US-India nuclear deal and the cobbling of a super-opportunist front with dubious leaders like Ms Mayawati and Jayalalithaa and Mr. O.P. Chautala. The West Bengal CPM was unhappy with this; it pushed the TMC and Congress into an alliance.

Mr. Karat conceded that the timing of withdrawal was controversial. But Vijayawada didn't revise the official line blaming the defeat on "state-specific" factors including governance, "arrogance" and corruption.

Mr. Karat shrewdly bought some insurance for himself for a post-2011 defeat. He can quote the Vijayawada resolutions in self-defence. But that won't help the CPM.

The CPM faces a bleak election prospect. In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front is widely expected to lose the coming elections. Its Lok Sabha tally plummeted from 19 out of 21 in 2004 to only 4 seats last year. The LDF took no bold pro-people measures.

Kerala party Secretary Pinarayee Vijayan, named in a scandal related to a Canadian contract, is the first Communist party politburo member to have been charged for corruption.

The West Bengal outcome could be

worse. If the Assembly vote follows the Lok Sabha pattern, the Left Front's score will fall from 235 (of 294 seats) to 110-120. But it could sink even lower.

In 2009, the Front lost support in all Bengal regions, barring Jangalmahal, where it won 5 of 6 Lok Sabha seats. Now, Trinamool leads the LF in 130 constituencies in Central and Southern Bengal. If it expands the recently made opening in Jangalmahal, it will score an emphatic victory.

That's why the CPM mortally fears Ms Banerjee's foray into Lalgurha. Trinamool thugs can unleash even more violence against the Left than Maoists.

If Trinamool comes to power, there will be large-scale bloodshed -- a prospect no public-spirited citizen can relish.

The CPM itself is largely responsible for this situation. Its policies of the 1980s eroded some of its early gains since 1977 -- including land reforms, panchayati raj, women's empowerment and joint forest management.

By the early 1990s, the CPM became complacent as it repeatedly won elections without doing much for the people. Its local-level leaders developed a stake in the status quo and getting a cut in various contracts -- whether for school buildings or construction-labour supply.

The magnet of power drew into the party unscrupulous operators with no commitment to Left-wing ideas. More than two-thirds of the Bengal CPM's membership was recruited after 1977.

Monobina Gupta, a journalist and a former CPM cardholder, has lucidly documented the party's alienation from its base in her just-published book *Left Politics in Bengal*. Party cadres got mired in corruption. The CPM turned against its own supporters.

Further degeneration came early this decade when the CPM promoted private capital-based rapid industrialisation through sweetheart deals and tax breaks.

The Singur and Nandigram crises over land acquisition for industry were direct effects of this misguided policy. The state and the party unleashed violence against the people to take their land, crush their resistance and "teach them a lesson."

Singur and Nandigram became household synonyms all over India for the loathsome betrayal of the people by a force which rose to power with their support.

The CPM's base among Muslims also eroded thanks to Nandigram, and the growing realisation among West Bengal's Muslims after the Sachar Committee report that they have had a raw deal. Although they form 25% of the population, Muslims' representation in government is only 2%. They have the least exposure to modern secular education.

Impending election defeat should have shocked the CPM into sincere, deep introspection and self-criticism, impelling radical course correction. But the CPM leadership chose to behave like an ostrich. Worse, it came down heavily on inner-party critics.

When party members demanded free and open debate on policies, strategy and tactics, and criticised the organisational doctrine of Democratic Centralism -- which concentrates excessive power at the apex and outlaws real debate except at party congresses -- Mr. Karat answered them by asserting that Democratic Centralism is essential to Leninism and indispensable for a revolutionary party.

This spells censorship and status quo -- a recipe for decline, disaster, and eventually, demise. Unless the CPM leadership admits that its basic political strategy is in deep crisis, and that the rot isn't limited to state-related factors, it will learn nothing and won't change course.

The CPM could then go the same way as the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union, East Germany or Romania. And that would be a terrible tragedy for Indian politics.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. Email: bidwai@bol.net.in.