

## Sensible words from JS committee

*All concerned should pay heed*

THE parliamentary standing committee on the information ministry made two very pertinent points which can be deemed as wise counsel from inside the parliament and the ruling party for the good of the government itself. First of all, the chief of the JS body Obaidul Quader urged the government to 'accept criticism if it believes in democracy'. We have also been emphasizing the fact that the government from which stands to benefit from constructive criticism from whichever quarter it might come. Rather than being in a denial mode when news or comments critiquing government performance appear, the institution or agency coming under fire for legitimate reasons should be encouraged to take it in the right spirit. That is the way they can improve their services and increase their credibility.

The government may not receive feedback from its agencies which may well be interested in pleasing the former with the words it would like to hear rather than furnish correct information. It is the independent and credible media which is the source on which the government can rely for gauging public pulse about where things are going right and where wrong. That is why the committee has told the information minister that 'the government and the media should work hand in hand to strengthen democracy'. As a matter of fact we would like the government to hold regular periodic press conferences to brief the newsmen on matters of national and public importance. There should be designated spokesman in each ministry and government directorate or office which is also ordained under the RTI.

The second point that the parliamentary body on information ministry made is of particular importance as far as implementing the right to information goes. Obaidul Quader pointed out emphatically, 'putting some computers on tables in the different government offices does not mean digital Bangladesh'. We couldn't agree more. He also lamented that the websites of different ministries have no updates on information once loaded into the computer. Some websites contained photographs of ministers and a spread-out of oath taking ceremony and nothing else. This is as ridiculous as making a mockery of digitisation.

Let the matter be not confined to rhetoric and tokenism, it should be adopted in right earnest. For, if transparency, accountability, incorruptibility and efficiency of the government are to be guaranteed there is no better way to ensure these than through computerisation of the administration.

## Better performance at the primary level exam

*The gradation system deserves a rethinking*

THE primary schools and their students have again got nationwide attention with the publication of the results of the Primary Education Terminal and Ebtedayee (madrasa) Examinations for 2010. Interestingly, the score sheet of the examinations has again provided reason for great enthusiasm for the schools situated in the rural areas as they have bagged most of the top positions in order of merit. Such performance by the rural students flies in the face of the commonly held belief that resource-rich city-based schools with better-tutored children from more well-to-do families are foreordained to do better in the exams.

Some features of the results are very reassuring. For instance, the better pass percentage (around 92 per cent) of this year, which is four per cent higher than that of the previous year, is reflective of the fact that the teachers are giving more attention to the classroom instructions. And, of course, students are no doubt working harder. The fact that the girl students have fared better than the boys does also speak well for the encouragement female education is receiving from the state and society at large. Kudos is also due to the primary and mass education ministry for the emphasis they have laid on primary level education through introducing public examination at this level.

While we express our appreciation for these brighter sides of the primary education results, we cannot also forget the students who either failed in the exams or could not make it to the final examination. The figures show that, of more than 2.15 million students who got registered for final exams, only around 1.94 million could finally take the exams. That means more than 0.2 million candidates dropped out of the list of examinees. Add to them another 0.15 million who were unsuccessful. In other words, around 16 per cent of the registered students in the primary final will be facing uncertain future. This is undoubtedly a matter of concern for the parents or guardians of rural children, because given the financial condition of their families, they may not even get a second chance for schooling in their lifetime. The education ministry and especially the schools concerned should look into the causes of the drop-outs and failures and take special measures to ensure that the rates of failures and drop-outs could be gradually reduced in the successive years.

There is another aspect of the primary school final exams that demands further attention. This is about the system of gradation in the exam. It can be seen from the results that out of the 1.95 million students who appeared, 0.2 million, which is more than 10 per cent of the total, passed in the third division. Though these students fall in the category of the successful, their result itself may well come in the way of their entry into the secondary level education. Such a prospect calls for giving a second thought to the prevailing system of gradation at such an early level of education.

## Women in local government

The culture of local government needs to be changed to ensure that women are treated fairly and equally and to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable. At the same time, gender awareness programmes for men and women need to be developed so that they can have a more effective role in the development process of the country.

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THE role of women in leadership situations has been the subject of debate in the last two decades. At the international level, the United Nations conferences on women have, in particular, advocated the need to increase the number of women in decision-making positions. In the Asia and Pacific region the initiatives to encourage women's political participation have focused mainly on women's leadership at central government level. However, women have always been an integral part of their communities and they take a very active role in village life, community organizations in towns and cities. Local government is much closer to this level of participation and is often a first step into a political decision making arena.

Women in Bangladesh live in a social system where the socialisation process plays an influential role in pushing them into an inferior and subordinate position in society. This socialisation process starts almost with the birth of a child. Through different treatment in their everyday lives, a sex identity is acquired. This socialisation process associates girls with the home and boys with a wider environment. This results in an unfavourable attitude of women towards politics.

Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. It is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

Unequal access to education and training to develop their skills, and also to employment, will make women more economically dependent on men. All these factors reinforce each other to keep women's political participation low, which makes them unable to keep control over the community's resources.

McCormack, in Bambewala (1983), mentions three factors that are responsible for women's non-participation in politics. Political participation may include activities such as picketing and convincing and influencing public authorities, to which women in Bangladesh are generally not habituated. That is why they keep themselves far from politics.

Conventionally, in a patriarchal society like ours, women are always identified with domestic life while politics is viewed as a male-dominated public activity. Even after the completion of the UN declared Women's Decade (1976-85),



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politics in Bangladesh remains male-dominated with respect to number, position in the party hierarchy, presence and effectiveness in the national legislature and other political structures, or whatever other criteria are set for measuring the extent of participation in this particular activity.

Presence of women in the national parliament does not really reflect the level of political consciousness of the women of the country. The condition of women's participation in local level politics is sometimes worse than it is national politics. Women's involvement in the political process at the local level is needed to make them familiar with the problems of the local community in general and women's needs and issues in particular. The activities of the local level women politicians, and their constant contact and interaction with the women of the local community go a long way in raising the political consciousness of women around them.

Local government plays an influential role in grassroot level development through responding to local needs. Local government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan, 1997:92). According to Article 59(1) of the Constitution of Bangladesh: "Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall

be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law (Salam, 2006)."

Local government at the union level was first introduced by the British in 1870, and was called "Chowkidary Panchayat." It consisted of five persons, all of whom were nominated by the district magistrate. The only function of the "Chowkidary Panchayat" was to maintain law and order in the villages, and maintenance tax was imposed on villag-

ment, it will be quite impossible to think about sound development of any developing country like Bangladesh. Local government is considered as the linchpin of any country's central government.

A truly democratic and representative government cannot be established without women's participation in the political processes. Political participation is a means of gaining access to the power structure, where decisions with regard to the allocation of resources amongst

ers for running it.

The Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh can be seen as a milestone towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in political power structures. This amendment provided direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections. It gave the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making and provided an opportunity to bring women to the centre of local development and develop new grassroots level leadership.

But the number of women in elective positions of chairperson and member in the Union Parishads was abysmally low even after 3 seats were reserved for women candidates, because women elected from reserved seats do not get institutional support and are often not included in mainstream activities, and their responsibilities are sometimes not stated clearly. Even those who are elected as chairperson or general member are often ignored during decision-making only because they are women.

The world has just celebrated 100 years of International Women's Day, with the theme "Equal Rights, Equal Opportunities: Progress for All." Without mainstreaming women in the development process and integrating them equally in local level and central govern-

ment, it will be quite impossible to think about sound development of any developing country like Bangladesh. Local government is considered as the linchpin of any country's central government.

Though Amendment 1997 provided direct elections to reserved seats for women in local level elections, there are some serious lacunas in gender balancing both in terms of governance policy and in reform agenda. The Union Parishad is the most popular democratic institution at the grassroots level. Therefore, the state of women's participation at this level is crucial and deserves special attention to empower them, as participation and empowerment are closely related.

The culture of local government needs to be changed to ensure that women are treated fairly and equally and to make sure that discrimination against women is not acceptable. At the same time, gender awareness programmes for men and women need to be developed so that they can have a more effective role in the development process of the country.

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## The finite world

What the commodity markets are telling us is that we're living in a finite world, in which the rapid growth of emerging economies is placing pressure on limited supplies of raw materials, pushing up their prices. And America is, for the most part, just a bystander in this story.

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OIL is back above \$90 a barrel. Copper and cotton have hit record highs. Wheat and corn prices are way up. Over all, world commodity prices have risen by a quarter in the past six months.

So what's the meaning of this surge? Is it speculation run amok? Is it the result of excessive money creation, a harbinger of runaway inflation just around the corner? No and no.

What the commodity markets are telling us is that we're living in a finite world, in which the rapid growth of emerging economies is placing pressure on limited supplies of raw materials, pushing up their prices. And America is, for the most part, just a bystander in this story.

Some background: The last time the prices of oil and other commodities were this high, two and a half years ago, many commentators dismissed the price spike as an aberration driven by speculators. And they claimed vindication when commodity prices plunged in the second half of 2008.

But that price collapse coincided with a severe global recession, which led to a sharp fall in demand for raw materials. The big test would come when the world economy recovered. Would raw materials once again become expensive?

Well, it still feels like a recession in America. But thanks to growth in developing nations, world industrial production recently passed its previous peak and, sure enough, commodity prices are surging again.

This doesn't necessarily mean that speculation played no role in 2007-2008. Nor should we reject the notion that speculation is playing some role in current prices; for example, who is that mystery investor who has bought up much of the world's copper supply? But the fact that world economic recovery has also brought a recovery in commodity prices strongly suggests that recent price fluctuations mainly reflect fundamental factors.

What about commodity prices as a harbinger of inflation? Many commentators on the right have been predicting for years that the Federal Reserve, by printing lots of money it's not actually doing

that, but that's the accusation setting us up for severe inflation. Stagflation is coming, declared Representative Paul Ryan in February 2009; Glenn Beck has been warning about imminent hyperinflation since 2008.

Yet inflation has remained low. What's an inflation worrier to do?

One response has been a proliferation of conspiracy theories, of claims that the government is suppressing the truth about rising prices. But lately many on the right have seized on rising commodity prices as proof that they were right all along, as a sign of high overall inflation just around the corner.

You do have to wonder what these people were thinking two years ago, when raw material prices were plunging. If the commodity-price rise of the past six months heralds runaway inflation, why didn't the 50 percent decline in the second half of 2008 herald runaway deflation?

Inconsistency aside, however, the big problem with those blaming the Fed for rising commodity prices is that they're suffering from delusions of US economic grandeur. For commodity prices are set globally, and what America does just isn't that important a factor.

In particular, today, as in 2007-2008, the primary driving force behind rising commodity prices isn't demand from the United States. It's demand from China and other emerging economies. As more and more people in formerly poor nations are entering the global middle class, they're beginning to drive cars and

eat meat, placing growing pressure on world oil and food supplies.

And those supplies aren't keeping pace. Conventional oil production has been flat for four years; in that sense, at least, peak oil has arrived. True, alternative sources, like oil from Canada's tar sands, have continued to grow. But these alternative sources come at relatively high cost, both monetary and environmental.

Also, over the past year, extreme weather especially severe heat and drought in some important agricultural regions played an important role in driving up food prices. And, yes, there's every reason to believe that climate change is making such weather episodes more common.

So what are the implications of the recent rise in commodity prices? It is, as I said, a sign that we're living in a finite world, one in which resource constraints are becoming increasingly binding. This won't bring an end to economic growth, let alone a descent into Mad Max-style collapse. It will require that we gradually change the way we live, adapting our economy and our lifestyles to the reality of more expensive resources.

But that's for the future. Right now, rising commodity prices are basically the result of global recovery. They have no bearing, one way or another, on US monetary policy. For this is a global story; at a fundamental level, it's not about us.

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