

## Mount credible investigation Come clean on Padma Bridge allegations

THE World Bank has made serious allegations, in what we believe to be in written form, to the Government of Bangladesh centring around the Padma Bridge project. At the moment, it has suspended funding. JICA and ADB are following the World Bank lead waiting to see how we settle the graft allegations with the Bank. Where multilateral financial institutions fund a multibillion dollar project, the co-financiers usually go the way of the largest contributor in bankrolling a mega project. That is only to be expected.

What is extremely puzzling is why the government is putting its entire reputation at stake just for an alleged indiscretion on the part of a minister or a company. Without passing any judgment on any individual or a process, let it be said that the World Bank has alleged a 'certain misconduct' after what we would like to think due diligence and all that it needs is a thorough and scooping investigation to get to the truth of the matter. And then assure all concerned of having pursued the matter with due diligence and thus come clean on it. Merely persisting in saying 'no corruption' has taken place is not enough of a response to the situation. Instead of taking an initiative, the government is apparently waffling, creating a smokescreen and confounding the matter in the process. Let us not forget that it is a matter of handling international finance in which even the slightest of misgivings in the minds of development partners has to be scrupulously avoided, and if given rise to, addressed, with seriousness and sincerity.

We would, therefore, urge the government to launch an immediate investigation into the WB allegations and put the minister out of office for the duration of the inquisition so as to prevent any possibility of his influencing the course of inquiry as is the standard practice. There are examples aplenty in India, Britain and Japan, where ministers have even resigned in the face of alleged scams, allowing for the investigation to take its course.

## Danger stalking Gross oversight of public safety

TWO pictures appearing in this newspaper in the front page the day before speak volumes about how we have to constantly face and skirt danger in our daily life. Most of these are due to lack of concern for public safety on the part of the administration and law enforcers.

It defies comprehension, but it is a regular sight, that vehicles would be carrying payloads not only above their load capacity but also beyond their size of the vehicle. Can there be anything more dangerous on the streets of the capital than a truck carrying metal rods that jut out of its tail, or far above its sideboard. And that at night is even more dangerous since the following vehicle cannot see the tail light, a recipe for serious accident. Shouldn't the traffic have impounded the vehicle as soon as it hit the road? We do not need a new law for such violations. We wish the traffic police would be more vigilant and sensitive to our safety.

It is equally disconcerting to see people continue to live in dilapidated buildings in an old part of Dhaka city, where more than a hundred buildings have been declared either vulnerable or highly risky. And there is history of people being killed by collapsing building in this area in June 2004.

Apparently, these buildings cannot be demolished by the owners either because the area these are located in has been declared a heritage site or that the buildings are listed under Vested Property Act. Surely, nothing is more important than human lives and no law or caveat should stand against ensuring people's safety.

We would hope that the authorities concerned would immediately address these issues and take immediate steps so that unnecessary loss to life and property can be avoided.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 17

**539** BC Cyrus the Great marches into the city of Babylon, releasing the Jews from almost 70 years of exile.

**1610** French king Louis XIII is crowned in Rheims.

**1888** Thomas Edison files a patent for the Optical Phonograph (the first movie).

**1905** The October Manifesto issued by Tsar Nicholas II of Russia.

**1907** Guglielmo Marconi's company begins the first commercial transatlantic wireless service.

**1912** Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia declare war on the Ottoman Empire, joining Montenegro in the First Balkan War.

**1933** Albert Einstein flees Nazi Germany and moves to the United States.

**1956** The first commercial nuclear power station is officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II in Sellafield,in Cumbria, England.

### KALEIDOSCOPE

# Saving institutions



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

At a dialogue the other day noted intellectuals blamed the failure of democracy in Bangladesh on general disrespect of politicians

towards the judiciary, the election commission and parliament. There is no gainsaying the diagnosis of what is ailing the country's politics made by the social and political thinkers, law-makers, jurists and economists.

However, the political parties in question are never short of rhetoric about democracy, people's right to voting, freedom of speech and so on. But remember those are mere rhetoric and make the stuff of their public speeches. But when it comes to applying them in practice, well, business is business. It is like what the proverbial preacher told his disciples: "Follow what I say, but not me."

The lack of the courage of one's conviction is understandable. Capitulation and turning political somersaults is no stranger to our political history and culture. We have been witness to such political antics whenever a military dictator usurped state power. Not only politicians, but some among our intellectuals also could not prove themselves immune to the temptations of power and pelf they would distribute with abandon.

But the politicians' disrespect for these institutions that the intellectuals have identified to be the root cause of their failure to deliver is a not any new development in the Bangladesh society. In fact, the social and political thinkers and researchers are only pointing at the symptom, but not the cause of the ailment. For one has to bear in mind that politicians are members of this society. If they are at fault, then the section of society they represent has also to bear some responsibility for it.

The politicians' attitude must be reflective of a collective attitude of this section towards the democratic and state institutions in question.

But this social category is also the most privileged among all other classes of society and rules the country through its representatives. The politicians within the fold of the two major political parties, one of which is now in power, while the other in the opposition speak for this section of society. Even the beneficiaries of the military regimes that usurped state power during these four decades of Bangladesh's existence fall under the category of this social category.

That is why we see in these dominant political parties so many military and civil bureaucrats who worked with the then military regimes. Ironically,

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during the democratic movements launched against the military dictators, it is the same political parties that were at the forefront.

The man in the street often wonders why the champions of democracy in the leadership of these parties forget the past so conveniently when they take those civil and military bureaucrats who served the military dictators and persecuted their leaders and workers during the pro-democracy movements in the past. In fact, there is nothing out of the ordinary here, because they are also members of the same political class these major political parties represent.

The genesis of this social class and its political arms in the shape of these parties hold the clue to the apparently

aberrant attitude of these parties to the institutions in question.

Before the emergence of Bangladesh, the section of the civil bureaucrats who worked under the Pakistani military government were often discriminated against in terms of the power and privilege they enjoyed in comparison to their Western non-Bengali counterparts. The new business people, the professional community and other disgruntled sections of society disillusioned with the Muslim League made a common cause with one another and were looking for a platform that promised to fight for their cause against the centre. And since they knew that as a small privileged section of society, it would not be possible to realise its aspirations, it expressed its grievances in popular terms so that it might be able to draw the mass people

of the eastern wing of Pakistan in the struggle against the centre.

Naturally, it was the Awami League and its leadership on which they betted their luck. Why it was Awami League and not any other party? That is because the Muslim League of the eastern wing of Pakistan was tied unconditionally to the central government in the Western part of Pakistan. It served the military government even at the expense of the interest of their Bengali speaking fellow travellers knowing fully well that this section of Bengali society was being deprived of their due and discriminated against by the central government.

The other populist parties including the one under Moulana Bhasani, named National Awami Party (NAP)

was not trusted by this newly emerging social glass since these parties proved to be too much left leaning. And as indicated in the foregoing, this social class was successful through its political propaganda to pass itself as championing the cause of social and political emancipation of all other social classes of the then east Pakistan with the slogan of Bengali nationalism.

The rest is history. After Bangladesh came into existence, the social class that supported Awami League in the struggle against Pakistan claimed its pound of flesh. And being a newly emerged class, their greed knew no bound.

This limitless greed proved to be the nemesis of the new social class and the politics that served it. In course of time, it broke up among competing and antagonistic factions. As these new aspirants for the resources of the nation were at each others throat, the military, too, at an opportune moment staked its claim to state power. So, began the era of the civil-military bureaucrats in politics of power.

They used the state and its constitutional institutions at will without any respect for their sanctity to suit their narrow end. And this has been going on for long at the hands of both the civil and military governments. They have made these fundamental institutions of state and democracy so subservient to their whims and caprices that they have forgotten that those were once most venerated institutions and to hallow those, the people had spilled their blood.

To save those people's institutions from desecration, the people will have to rise up against the social class and its politics that is usurping those institutions. Otherwise, there is hardly any possibility that the realisation would dawn on the dominant social class and its politics on its own to change their attitude towards the constitutional institutions.

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### PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# People's power vs. nuclear power



PRAFUL BIDWAI

If Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wanted to insult the people agitating against the Koodankulam nuclear reactors at India's southern

tip, he could have found no better way than agreeing to meet their delegation on October 7-- only to have Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) Secretary Srikumar Banerjee lecture them on the virtues of nuclear power.

The meeting was held to respond to the grassroots demand for scrapping the project. The demand's moral force, expressed in a 12-day hunger strike by over 100 people, impelled the Tamil Nadu cabinet to ask that project construction be halted.

The delegates had to suffer Mr. Banerjee, who recently disgraced India's scientific community. Just as the Fukushima disaster turned nasty with the March 12-14 hydrogen explosions, he dismissed its gravity. He said the explosions -- which indicated severe core damage and aggravated it -- were "a purely chemical reaction, not a nuclear emergency!" Nothing could have been more delusional.

Dr. Singh promised to halt work on two Russian-made reactors at Koodankulam, but immediately went back on his word. The protestors started another fast and 10,000 people besieged the plant site.

The protestors shouldn't be treated like ignorant and misguided children to be coached and disciplined by a nanny state. Their leaders are well-informed professionals, including S.P. Udayakumar, who has taught at a US university, M. Pushparayan, a lawyer, and Tuticorin's Bishop.

Their case is compelling. The two 1,000 MW reactors under construction were never subjected to an Environment Impact Assessment. They were cleared by the environment ministry five years before the EIA process started -- without considering the intrinsic hazards of nuclear reactors.

The reactors will daily draw in millions of litres of freshwater, and

release it at a high temperature into the sea, affecting the fish catch on which lakhs of livelihoods depend. They are being built within a one-kilometre radius of major population-centres, violating the 1.6-km "nil-population" zone stipulation.

The reactors will routinely release effluents and emissions containing radioactivity, a poison you can't see, touch or smell. Scientific studies covering 136 nuclear sites in seven countries show abnormally high leukemia rates among children, and higher incidence of cancers, congenital deformities, and immunity and organ damage.

All nuclear activities produce wastes, which remain hazardous for thousands of years. Science hasn't yet found a safe way of storing wastes.

*It would be suicidal for India to build such nuclear projects. They will bankrupt the electricity sector and impose terrible health risks. There are perfectly sound, safe, cost-competitive renewable energy alternatives to nuclear power. That's where the future lies.*

Catastrophic accidents are possible in every nuclear reactor in the world, including a Chernobyl or Fukushima-style core meltdown. The death-toll from Chernobyl is conservatively estimated at 34,000 to 95,000, and is still climbing.

Twenty-five years on, 300,000 people cannot go back home because of radioactive contamination around Chernobyl. The Fukushima disaster still hasn't ended, but the station operator is already paying out \$50 billion in damages.

A reactor is a barely controlled nuclear bomb, where a runaway chain reaction is prevented by circulating water and some safety devices. But these can fail. Lack of cooling can produce a catastrophe as the fuel gets relentlessly heated.

That's what happened at Fukushima. The reactors couldn't

withstand the Magnitude 9 earthquake, belying the operator's claim. The tsunami knocked out the backup, precipitating a station blackout, causing a loss-of-coolant accident and meltdown.

A station blackout can occur because of any number of factors in any reactor, with unpredictable but uncontrollable consequences, including a meltdown.

PMANE activists understand this hazard. They probably know a lot more about the problems of Russian reactors than DAE bureaucrats who have failed to master nuclear technology.

A Norwegian group has revealed a special report by Russian nuclear safety experts in June, which says Russian reactors are grievously under-

vulnerable to hydrogen explosions, which ripped up reactor buildings at Fukushima. Most important, the report says that the risk of earthquakes hasn't been factored into Russian reactors' design. Nor are there clear guidelines or sufficient infrastructure for spent-fuel management, making leaks possible during a disaster.

These disclosures are damning. Rosatom chief Sergei Kiriyenko hasn't denied them, but merely claimed that more money would fix the flaws. The report contradicts the official Russian statement that a Fukushima-type meltdown could never happen in Russia.

The DAE makes identical claims about India -- as baselessly. Confronted with an informed opposition, it has stooped to maligning the broad-based multi-religious PMANE as a Church-dominated group.

The DAE also sees "the foreign hand" behind the movement. This is a bit rich coming from a department whose very survival now depends on the "foreign hand": importing reactors from Russia, France and the US -- without scrutiny.

Similarly, in Jaitapur in Maharashtra, the DAE is slinging mud at the opposition, while telling people "radiation is your friend." The French-designed European Pressurised Reactors to be installed there are as problem-ridden as and even more expensive than Koodankulam's VVERs.

EPRs haven't passed safety tests anywhere, including France. Indeed, 3,000 safety issues have been raised about them. Their construction, in Finland and France, is behind schedule by four years. They have become the world's costliest reactors -- about four times costlier than India's nuclear or coal-fired plants and wind turbines.

It would be suicidal for India to build such nuclear projects. They will bankrupt the electricity sector and impose terrible health risks. There are perfectly sound, safe, cost-competitive renewable energy alternatives to nuclear power. That's where the future lies.

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