

Tipaimukh and the call for engagement

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Dr. R. Gowher Rizvi, advisor to the prime minister, wrote an article in *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* on December 13. He presented the Tipaimukh issue and our possible responses in a clear, logical and unbiased manner. My response is largely in support of his contention. I do not claim to have technical knowledge on the issue of water, environment, or hydraulics, but not being an expert has its own advantage of being objective and unbiased.

Let me start by saying that our position since the 1970s had been to jointly develop rivers that flow from India, Nepal and Bhutan into Bangladesh. Our water experts had repeatedly argued for creating water reservoirs in the high Himalayan hills. These reservoirs would store water during rainy summer months and reduce the impact of onrush of flood water, especially flash flood. The stored water could be released in a controlled manner in the dry winter months that would help irrigation, reduce dependency on ground water, check the inflow of saline water from the Bay of Bengal and improve river navigation not only in Bangladesh, but in India too. As an off-shoot from these dams, we could produce cheap and clean electricity that could reduce dependency on fossil fuel-based power generation.

Bangladesh's proposal failed to make headway mainly because while we proposed a basin-wide development of water resources, the Indians insisted on India-centered bilateral projects. There were also protests from environmentalists of the region. They argued that any dam would inundate fertile valleys, take out forests, displace local populace and create environmental problems. Meanwhile, over the last few years, a number of dams have been built high in the Himalayas in Bhutan; few more are in the pipeline. Bangladesh is negotiating with Bhutan to buy electricity from hydroelectricity projects that produce 1,000-2,000 MW of electricity each. One way to compare their production and size is to compare those with our Kaptai hydroelectricity project that produce at its peak only 120-150 MW of electricity.

In Tipaimukh, initially, the Indian plan was to construct a dam for water storage and generation of electricity. They also planned a barrage for irrigation in Fulertol in Shilchar, Assam. Bangladesh always opposed unilateral withdrawal of water from common rivers and from the very beginning, the government, irrespective of party affiliation, had raised its concern against water withdrawal. The present position of the Indian government is that a

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dam will be built in Tipaimukh for producing, at its peak, 1,500 MW of electricity.

The dam will, besides producing electricity, store excess water in summer monsoon and release it in winter to run the turbines. The Indian government states that there will be no withdrawal of water and there will no barrage in Fulertol. This assurance has been given officially by the central government and, as Dr. Rizvi says, the assurance is binding and unequivocal.

It means that the total available water in Barak will remain unchanged, but during monsoon season the flow of water will be less than what it is now and there will be more water available during winter months. The overall impact will be somewhat mitigated by additional rain water that flows from lower Assam, Mizoram and Nagaland into Barak river system downstream of Tipaimukh. Also, the rain water from the southern slope of the Khasi hills and the northern slopes of Tripura hills flow into the bowl, augmenting 120-150 inches of annual rainfall that Sylhet division gets.

All this water creates a unique inundated zone, known locally as *haors*. *Haors* go under water during summer and provide good fishing ground. As the water recedes, some parts of the *haor* provide huge *boro* harvest. Tipaimukh dam will be able to lower the effect of flood along the Barak river system, but heavy rain in Khasi hills or in Tripura can still cause local flash flood. The Surma that virtually dries up in winter and pre-monsoon months will have more water available, which is good news for navigation as well as for irrigation. More water in Kushiara will allow river craft to operate round the year from Chittagong to Assam. There will be less siltation, thus saving on costly, and often futile, dredging. Fish production might rise at the cost of *boro* cultivation in the *haor* areas.



Concern has been raised on Tipaimukh being in a seismically active zone. A severe earthquake could cause widespread damage downstream. But for us, in Bangladesh, the impact will be less severe than in India because the water will have to travel about 200 km before reaching Bangladesh. The whole of Shilchar-Hailakandi area of lower Assam will bear the brunt before it reaches us. There are many dams in seismically active zones of the world. Any engineering structure can fail, so can a dam; what is needed is a proper earthquake resistant design.

While evaluating the impact of Tipaimukh Dam one might look at the Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh. Besides producing electricity, the biggest contribution of the Kaptai Dam had been flood control downstream of Kaptai. There has been no desertification or ecological degradation of Chittagong that could be attributed to Kaptai Dam. However, the biggest sufferers have been the hill people, whose agricultural land went under the lake. The same will happen in case of Tipaimukh. While there will be ecological impact throughout the basin, it is the people of Manipur who will be most affected.

Dr. Rizvi suggested a knowledge-based scientific response to the Tipaimukh issue rather than empty rhetoric. Although we have the highest availability of fresh water per capita in the world, we are guilty of criminal negligence of our water resources. We have allowed thousands of miles of waterways to vanish due to decades of neglect. We often encroach upon rivers and canals so that they ultimately die. We pollute the water bodies in such a

way that they cannot sustain any living organism.

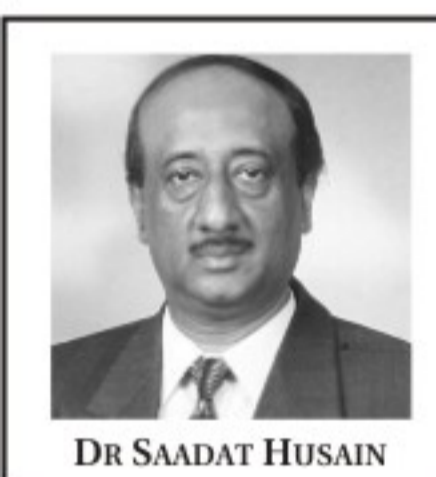
Water, which is going to be the most important resource in future, never got the importance it deserves. Therefore, when we face the Indians across the negotiating table, our shortcomings become evident. Dr. Rizvi suggested increased comprehensive and systematic study of the socio-economic, environmental, hydrological and climatological impact of Tipaimukh project. The question is, "Are we prepared for it?"

Hollow rhetoric is easier than serious research. We need to engage with the Indians with facts and statistics. If we wish to have our say in the issue, we need to invest in the project to become a stakeholder; only then can we have our say from inside. I recommend the formation of a high-powered Indo-Bangladesh organization styled "Barak-Meghna Basin Authority" that would undertake basin-wide study of the water resources.

Meanwhile, until a full assessment is done and a joint report is published and accepted, the Indians will have to be persuaded not to go ahead with the construction of the dam. In this, we shall need the support of the Indian policy makers, environmentalists, think-tanks, NGOs, the civil society and most importantly, people of the Indian North-East. We have got to engage with people who appreciate our point of view of joint development of water, and indeed, of all common resources. What we need is proper homework, not cheap political gimmick like "Jaan debo tobu Tipaimukh Bandh hote debo na."

The writer is a retired Air Commodore, Bangladesh Air Force.

Extension of retirement age: It was long overdue



RECENTLY, the cabinet took the decision to extend the age of superannuation from 57 to 59 for the government employees. People seem to be curious to ascertain the implications of this decision from the financial, administrative and political perspectives. There

is a general apprehension that this might result in deepening the problem of unemployment. An analysis of the background and the situational context may be useful to have a clear understanding of the matter.

To knowledgeable people the decision has not come all of a sudden. The issue has been deliberated at least for more than a decade by successive governments. Developments in the last few years have created a compelling situation in favour of this decision. In many countries, including India and Pakistan, the age of superannuation is around 60. General improvement of physical health helps maintain the productivity of the aged person beyond 60 or even 70 or 80. We have some ministers and public figures who are above 70 and still very active in their sphere of work. The superannuation age for the judges of the Supreme Court has been extended to 67, and that of the university teachers to 65. There was, therefore, no reason to keep the superannuation age fixed at 57 for civil servants and those in the lower judiciary, at least not on health or productivity grounds.

Actually, the age limit could not be extended because of informal resistance from the immediate junior officers, particularly from the additional secretary and joint secretary levels of the government. They strongly lobbied with the ministers and policy makers against extension of super annuity age. They contended that such extension could delay their being promoted to the post of secretary or additional secretary. They impressed upon policy makers that they were competent to discharge the responsibility of the secretary and any delay in their promotion would be detrimental to the country's interest. They also argued that extension of retirement age would imply enhancement of unemployment for the educated youth.

It was interesting to observe when these officers became secretaries and their retirement was approaching they turned volte-face and started arguing that the retirement age should be enhanced for the benefit of

the country. It was clear that the argument for and against the extension of retirement age hinged on narrow cohort interest. It had very little significance for productivity or the welfare of common people.

The eligibility age all over the world, unfortunately, has not been determined through elaborate deliberations on the issue. Though age limit is the most important criterion to define childhood, there is no unequivocal limit of this variable. Similarly, we are still not aware of when eligibility for being a voter or MP or president of the country has been arrived at. One constitutional pronouncement follows another, that's all. There have not been many international conferences, seminars, erudite discussions to settle this issue in a scientific manner. We are following what our elders believed despite spectacular improvements in the field of cognitive development. It is strongly suggested that in all matters there should be discussion to arrive at a logical decision as to what the determinant variable would be.

The decision for extension had to be taken either now or within a couple of years. It was only a matter of time. Since the decision had to be taken, further delay would not bring any good.

Immediate financial benefit will follow the extension of age limit for superannuation. It will not be necessary to pay additional pension benefits. In future also, the incumbents will serve for additional two years before they become eligible for pension benefits. The main apprehension is about the unemployment of the young population. The author does not consider it as a big problem because government employment is only a slim swath of total employment. The number of migrant labour force every year is far too big compared to employment generation in the public sector. At any rate, thousands of posts in public service remain vacant. If serious attempts are made we would be able to fill up all the vacant posts in the next year. The apprehension of aggravated unemployment will be greatly mitigated.

On average, the country will benefit from the service of the experienced and productive employees at 57, who are no more considered as aged workers in the present day world. The decision to enhance the age limit for superannuation might have been deferred for another one or two years because of the resistance from those against it, but it could not be deferred indefinitely. The decision for extension had to be taken either now or within a couple of years. It was only a matter of time. Since the decision had to be taken, further delay would not bring any good.

The writer is a former Chairman, Public Service Commission.

TRIBUTE

KC: A nephew says goodbye

I'M in the habit of calling him KC. He's the uncle I bring up in conversation more than any other. Not because I admire him in the way the bouquet carrying political groups do, and not because I wish to expound on my family connections. I talk about him simply because I have always found him to be a hell of a fascinating guy.

It bewilders some people that I call him KC. He was the eldest of the family, after all, and normally had been referred to, respectfully, as *boro mama*, *boro chacha*, *Manik bhai* or *Sir* by extended kin and beyond. I have never heard him addressed simply by his first name, probably because just about everybody was younger than him.

But I called him KC most of the time. It's because my fascination goes beyond the usual uncle-nephew relational thing. He was a figure larger than life, a fixture, an institution and one unique human being. Of course, I routinely got asked why I refer to him as KC, just like I also get people raising their eyebrows when I say he was an "uncle." I don't look old enough to have a real uncle, an honest-to-god mother's brother, so close to nonagenarian status. But I don't talk about all that stuff -- what the family is like or his public persona.

To be honest, I've never found much interest in his kind of writing. His translations aren't much use to me. Nor did I care for the political activism or cultural "chief-guesting" that he so often filled his evenings with. I didn't see him as the national professor, or the public intellectual or the voice of left-liberal values that he seemed to be so venerated for in the public sphere. What has always fascinated me is just the man, his personality, his habits.

KC lived the kind of long and healthy life most of us mortals never will. He wrote a staggering number of books, spawned a family of three children, six grandchildren and three great grandchildren. His wife of sixty-something years was by his side till the very end. He died peacefully in his sleep, two months short of completing 89 years of life. But it's not that his life had been smooth. He'd been through a lot. He'd lived through turbulent historical events and had his share of struggles and personal tragedy. The eldest of a very long chain of brothers and sisters, he outlived no less than five younger siblings.

And yet, time after time, KC had picked himself up and moved on. He was always charming and pleasant. More often than not, he would be smiling. He talked about contemporary athletes and new young authors. At an age when most others complained about how old they were, not once would KC refer to his seniority. Not once did he complain about joint pain or bad eyesight or the attitudes of "young people these days." KC had



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better things to do. The whole "positive thinking" thing seems like an eye-roll inducing cliché in our hectic environment, but KC embodied it.

How did he do it? My guess is that he always minded his own business and did what he loved. Every morning he would leap out of bed and sit at his writing desk, working on yet another one of his translations. He didn't get tired of it, he didn't get bored. He once said he wished there were more than 24 hours to a day. When younger people offered him a chair, he would often refuse them, preferring to stand steadily with his arms crossed. He was keeping himself fit. He didn't give off vibes like he was a *murubbi*, and we didn't see him as one. Maybe because he was the *murubbi* of *murubbis*. No doubt he had his own philosophy, his way of dealing with tragedy and moving on, his way of dealing with aging, or dirty politics or even death threats. But he never preached. He just did his own thing.

So why do I always bring him up in conversation? It's because as far as individuals go, he was as cool as they come. Even within his massive family, he was unique. And I'm pretty sure there will never be another one like him.

Rest in peace, KC. We love you and will always miss you.

Written by a nephew.