

The water is finally rippling for the shipping minister

RIFAT MUNIM

SHIPPING Minister Shajahan Khan is a different kettle of fish altogether. All his fellow travelers (read ministers) hit the headlines for news of their respective ministries. He, on the other hand, comes into the news, that too beaming under halo round his head, for incidents that involve the communications ministry, not his own. And one can hardly forget the manner of his remarks about those tragic road accidents, taking all the errant bus and truck drivers under his wings as if the innocent passengers killed in the avoidable accidents deserved to die and as if it is he, not the communications minister, who is the legal custodian of the bus drivers. He is a trade union leader and also the executive president of the Bangladesh Sharak Paribahan Sramik Federation. Evidently, keeping his position as an indulgent transport leader is more important to him than innocent people's lives and his own ministry's affairs.

And when was the last time his name surfaced in the media for something that happened in the country's waterways, areas that geographically fall under his jurisdiction? About two months back, when nearly 150 passengers died in a launch capsized, his response was no different, marked as it was by insensitivity towards the victims. But only the empathy and unconditional love demonstrated towards the bus drivers was missing in the case of his launch drivers. The protective wings so carefully extended to the bus drivers did not sway even a bit to shield the launch drivers. What do you call it? Fixation over one's protégé's well being while his own are going down the toilet?

He, however, has made a remarkable difference lately. Even though no bus skidded off the road or no launch capsized, he came into the news occupying a special place, if not the centre stage. A cement company has been carrying out two projects in a river through the back door since long. Although hesitant at

first, he gradually was happy (we suppose) thinking that something was happening in the waterways again after such a long wait, and that too without anyone dying! So, he came forward and made the news.

And what was the news? It's quite an interesting read. A news item titled "Curious drama on river continues" in The Daily Star's May 18 issue tells us that Shah Cement Factory in Munshiganj has built two "unauthorised" concrete jetties in the middle of the Shitalakhya river, which is one of the worst forms of river encroachment because according to environmental laws, such jetties can only be built within the foreshore of a river, not in the middle or in any other part. Even after building jetties within the foreshore, the concerned company has to pay a certain amount of fee to the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), the autonomous custodian of our rivers. Shah Cement has neither abided by the law nor paid the fees. The overdue fees since 2004 amount to Tk.11 crore, while the blatant violation of environmental laws is another punishable offence.

The High Court, in a judgment on saving Dhaka's rivers passed in 2009, ordered that all rivers be freed from encroachment. Although nothing happened for two years since the order, something abruptly goaded the minister into directing the BIWTA to go for an eviction drive to demolish the illegally built jetties. Better late than never. Accordingly, on May 16, a BIWTA team led by a joint secretary and supported by high-powered

ships (whose maintenance requires a huge sum of money per day) went to the scene only to play parts (just like puppets) in a drama wherein the strings were being pulled by the fickle yet powerful minister. While the team was waiting for the final instruction, the minister scuppered the eviction plan and decided to let the jetties operate as before.

But in an unexpected turn of events, the BIWTA chairman refused to play the fool. Having been outraged by the minister's flip-flopping, he insisted on continuing with the drive because, he told reporters, it was about saving a river and not a child's game. The drama then took several melodramatic turns. The secretary sided with the minister and the magistrate along with the police deployed for the drive left undone despite the BIWTA chairman's iron will to continue. And what do you call it? A lone good apple in a basket full of rotten ones? So finally, the water is rippling for the shipping minister. And then calming again, leaving no trace of a

ripple. But what is really happening underneath the rippling and calming effects? Why is he wavering between two opposing ends of the same string? When asked, according to the said report, he said that he had succeeded in negotiating with the company, which is why he went back on his decision. He added that the decision to conduct the drive was a play to make the defaulting company pay the dues.

But the question remains whether the company is really going to pay the dues. Or is it trying to ink some

underhand deals? Even if it does agree to pay the fees, which are long overdue, why go back on the decision of the demolition drive? Shah Cement's jetties are blatant instances of river encroachment, which is a separate issue altogether and which calls for immediate punishment whether the fees are paid or not. Therefore, the minister's explanation simply does not wash and clearly smacks of something surreptitious going on under the rippling and calming effects. So, what apparently looks like a petty puppet show underlies an intricate scheme. And why not? After all, the game involves Shah Cement, which is a concern of the business giant Abul Khair Group.

Although the minister played his part pretty well offstage, he owes the people of the country cut and dried explanation of the whole matter. If he fails to explain the all too visible anomalies, people again will have their own answers formulated.

But aren't we, as a people, already tired of doing that: Seeing lawmakers get involved with all sorts of untoward happenings (one of them recently shot at an agitating mob!); seeing alleged corruption charges against AL ministers, and their proven inaction in their respective areas of jurisdiction. And when all is said and done, aren't we tired of having our own judgment and answers formulated? We want no more of that. Now we'd love some action. If he fails to clean up the mess piled up in his own house; if he fails to leave the neighbours' mess (meaning the communications ministry) to their own device, then we want the job to go to someone who cares about the rivers and public interest. Otherwise, it may be thought that the government is apparently held hostage by a reluctant minister who is not only a failure in tackling his own ministry's affairs but also stands in the way of improving our roads and highways by openly exercising his clout as a transport leader.

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Partnership for developing capital goods industry

NABHASH CHANDRA MANDAL and ASHRAF ALI

THE capital goods industry is the backbone of the industrial base in a nation. Every developed country invariably has a well-established domestic capital goods industry, complete with product design and analysis capabilities. Bangladesh should also attempt to develop its capital goods industry that would include product conceptualisation, analysis, prototype design, product strength and fatigue life testing, manufacturing, and product sustenance and maintenance provisions.

However, at this stage of "late industrialization," Bangladesh cannot possibly adopt a "go alone" strategy in developing its capital goods industry. Forming partnership with industrialised countries may be the best option open. We recall Malaysia's recent success in achieving economic development under the patronage of and by partnering with Japan.

That partnership benefitted both Japan and Malaysia. A partnership like this creates and enhances the demand for the capital goods from the advanced partner country while the junior partner engages in the domestic production of goods using intermediate-level technology.

Japan benefited because Malaysia, especially since 1987, started importing increasing amounts of machinery and transport equipment from Japan, including various manufactured products such as general machinery, electric machinery, metalworking machinery, construction and mining machinery, transport equipment including motor vehicles and parts, and electronic products. During the period 1987-1991, Malaysia's capital goods portion of the total import from Japan accounted for more than 60%. The imports of intermediate goods decreased proportionately from 46.8% in the year 1970 to 24.1% in the year 1991. Furthermore, in just a decade (1980-1990), the yen appreciated by 95.8% in nominal terms, by 70.3% in real terms and by 51.9% in terms of the real trade weighted exchange rate.

Malaysia benefited from the partnership because it allowed Malaysia to successfully launch its "Look East" policy with the goal of heavy industrialisation and renewed export-oriented industrialisation with foreign investments, dominated by East Asian investors, especially Japan. Malaysian industrialisation initiatives relied on inter-

mediate and capital goods and technology imports as well as direct foreign investment (DFI) from Japan. The Japanese foreign direct investment in Malaysia increased significantly since 1988.

Malaysia-Japan partnership fostered the chemistry for the growth opportunity of Malaysia, the junior partner, into a vibrant middle-income country within a short period of time. Japan allowed technology transfer to Malaysia to a sufficient degree, which allowed Malaysia to sow the seed of domestic product design and analysis capabilities with intermediate-level technology.

Bangladesh can follow Japan-Malaysia type economic symbiosis model in partnering with a suitable senior partner country such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, USA, European countries, Canada, and so on. The opportunity of such partnership has increased in recent years. For exam-

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ple, according to news reports, a number of organisations from USA, Canada and Japan asked Bangladesh Industry Technical Assistance Center (BITAC) in 2010 whether they could get automotive parts produced by the machinery manufacturing factories in Dholaikhal and Bhaluka. In April 2010, Dotcom online newspaper ran a story entitled "Automobiles with parts manufactured in Dholaikhal and Bhaluka will be driven in the USA." Can this possibility be formalised and what steps must be taken to institutionalise the relationship?

Every developing country should exercise caution in entering into this type of relationship involving economic development. Often the relationship is one-sided, in which only the senior partner benefits while the junior partner engages in dead-end assembly-type tasks without any provision for accelerated economic growth. The junior

partner must ensure that the relationship allows it to create "local product design and analysis centres," which are the key to securing high value addition and thus higher GDP growth, growth and sustenance of institutions of higher education and ultimately overall national well-being.

For the last several years there have been discussions on the prospects of establishing shipbuilding industry in Bangladesh. In 2008, Bangladesh shipbuilders had built and handed over one ship (Stella Morris) to a Danish company. Bangladesh shipbuilding companies have orders for another 45 medium and small size ships. The Bangladesh government is providing assistance for the development of this industry in various ways, such as cash and import incentive, tax holidays, creation of special shipbuilding zones, etc.

However, is the design work for these ships being conducted outside Bangladesh? Are Bangladeshi engineers currently getting an opportunity, or will they get an opportunity in the future to perform design-related work for shipbuilding? According to Dr. Abdur Rahim, retired professor of Naval Architecture of Buet and an expert on shipbuilding, Bangladeshi companies are confined to merely assembly work with no provision for design and analysis tasks to be performed in Bangladesh.

As such, whether conducted under mutual partnership or not, it is certain that shipbuilding in its current form will not contribute towards the development of "real" shipbuilding or capital goods industry in Bangladesh. The true development of the shipbuilding or the capital goods industry will have to ensure that product design and analysis are done domestically.

We agree that Bangladesh should establish partnership with willing industrialised nations and start the domestic production of capital goods parts and components with in-house product design and analysis provisions. This would enable Bangladesh to achieve a gross GDP growth rate in the desired range of 7% to 10% per year and will thus enable it to take national per capita income to a respectable level. Bangladesh is ready, more than ever, to enter into such a partnership and initiate product design and analysis work using intermediate-level technology.

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Remembering a public spirited lady

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

TEN years ago on this day an unusually public-spirited lady passed away. She was Dr. Maliha Khatun. It would be pertinent to remind that very few Bengali Muslim women were active on the social scene of erstwhile East Pakistan. It was a time when even educated women did not really venture out of the confines of their homes. In such a scenario Dr. Maliha made her mark as a distinguished educationist, writer and social worker.



D. Maliha Khatun

Dr. Maliha's talents were multi-dimensional she was an educationist of repute in addition to being a playwright, poet, short-story writer and a dedicated social worker of the country. She did her BA Honours from Bethune College, Calcutta after securing a first division in matriculation from Sakhawat Memorial School, Calcutta. She did her MA in Bengali and Philosophy. While in service she did her diploma and post-graduation in Education and Psychology respectively from Edinburgh University in 1957. During the fag end of her service career she obtained her Doctorate degree in Educational Psychology from Dhaka University.

The responsibility of public office, tireless social work and even the untimely death of her young daughter could not put a brake on her quest for knowledge and drive for public service. Even amongst her heavy work schedule she had enquired about the welfare of friends and relations and rendered moral and material assistance. The "Rokeya Sakhawat Samity" started functioning from her own residence in Dhanmondi where she arranged educational facilities for unlettered young children. "Kabya Kunja" a writers' salon had received literary and financial support from her and is now an active place for budding and established writers and poets.

Dr. Maliha's philanthropy was exemplary as this virtue was nearly unknown to Bengali Muslims. She had single-handedly rendered financial assistance to individuals and groups in distress and had even donated Tk.1 lac for the treatment of an ailing colleague. And all this happened without the slightest glare of publicity. Her lifelong savings has helped establish a charitable body styled as "Shamsul Huq-Nargis-Maliha Khatun Trust." This trust is rendering financial assistance and according reception to distinguished citizens and meeting educational expenses of the needy and meritorious.

There is a Trust fund of Tk.8 lac in her name in Dhaka University for catering to the educational requirements of poor and needy students pursuing science studies.

Dr. Maliha felt very passionately for the welfare of greater society beyond the requirements of the individual and group. She was active as an important office-bearer in bodies like Pabna Samity, Rajshahi-Khulna Divisional Development Society and Dhaka Divisional women's sports body. She was an active participant and speaker in seminars and symposiums organised by these bodies.

In recognition of her social service she was awarded the state-level Rokeya Padak in 2001. She was the first woman principal of Dhaka Teachers' Training College.

Dr. Maliha also penned seven books for children. In addition, she was regular contributor to several Bengali dailies. Her known publications run beyond thirty. She was awarded the Dewan Abdul Hamid Literary Award, the Nazrul National Award and the Sher-e-Bangla National Award in recognition of her literary accomplishments. She was member of Jatiya Mahila Sangstha, Lions Club, writers forum and Ahsania Mission amongst several others.

May the soul of Dr. Maliha Khatun rest in eternal peace.

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