

GROUND REALITIES

A tale of two prime ministers

Discovery drops hints Still scratching at the surface

THE discovery of a limestone deposit in Panchbibi upazila of Joypurhat by the Geological Survey of Bangladesh is another pointer to mineral resource potential of the country waiting to be tapped in on. The news is cheery because the deposit is preliminarily believed to be the largest, viably closer to the surface and capable of meeting the demand for limestone in the country. Currently, we are dependent on import of this important construction ingredient.

There is another possible bright dimension to the discovery. Beneath limestone deposits there is a likelihood of hitting coal.

We can take pride in the achievements of the geological survey of Bangladesh. By spending Tk 300 crore it has discovered mineral wealth worth around Tk 12 lakh 14 thousand crore to date. In the meantime, the coal from Boropukuria is being used in electricity generation. It is a long track record since 1950s of mineral discoveries including that of hard rock and peat. The potential is enormous in the northeastern parts of the country. Even the Cox's Bazar sea-belt and offshore islands are said to be rich in rarer minerals.

While exploring gas, oil has been found in Bibiana field. In fact, our gas is rich in methane which may be a hint to oil reserves.

The messages we draw from the successful exploratory exploits through indigenous capacity must not be lost on the government policy makers. While the government is expected to play a more energetic role, the private sector including NRBs will have to be associated with a string of projects geared to local capacity building. We have to admit that tapping of mineral resource is a capital-cum-technology intensive undertaking requiring adequate equipment and expertise bases. This will have to be provided to local institutions under a master plan. Otherwise, our critical dependence on transnational companies will continue in a context where energy self-sufficiency must be accorded top priority.

Unbridled growth of brick fields

Deforestation should be halted

A big threat to environment, the brick kilns are operating in an unregulated fashion defying the Bangladesh Brick Kiln Act, 2006 as well as the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Law, 1995 (amendment 2010).

And this defiance is largely due to lack of effective enforcement of the law which prohibits setting up of brick kilns within three kilometres of a reserve forest or a residential area and considers changing the characteristics of land a culpable crime.

Unsurprisingly, forests are being destroyed with abandon, while land characteristics of plain lands as well as alluvial topsoil get eroded and even hill tops damaged by unbridled growth of brick kilns.

To further complicate the problem, no government agency, neither the district administration, nor the Department of Environment (DoE) which regulates the brick kilns, is able to put a brake on their activities leading to massive destruction of forest lands leading to severe ecological imbalance.

A study conducted by a divisional forest office in Tangail shows that every year about 24 million standing trees equivalent to 96,000 acres of forest lands are being consumed by brick fields. Whereas the rate of deforestation is only 0.6 per cent in South Asia, Bangladesh destroys its green top cover at a rate that is about more than five times (3.3 per cent).

In absence of any correct study on the number of brick fields, threat that they pose to the forest lands, or the environment, for that matter, turns out to be so huge, even if we assume that only 30 per cent of the fuels they (brick kilns) use are firewood.

The government should therefore persuade the entrepreneurs in the sector to switch to alternative technologies that do not depend on firewood.

What is most important is to apply the laws strictly to arrest the deforestation forthwith. At the same time, the government should strengthen the DoE, especially its enforcement and monitoring units, with sufficient manpower so that it may implement



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

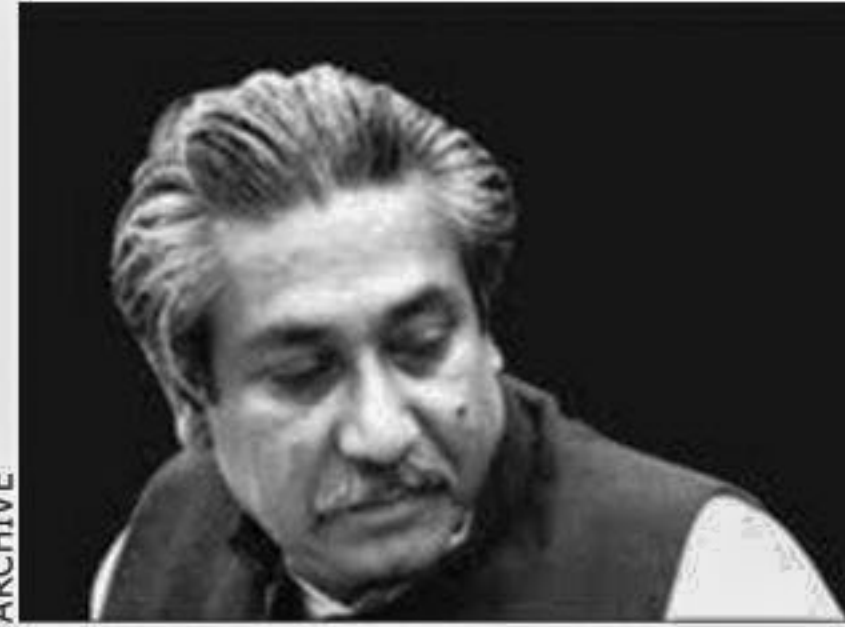
BACK in 1974, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government battled adversity on a diverse scale in order to keep itself

going. A debilitating famine threatened to put everything asunder. Anti-government elements, always keen about undermining the administration and especially the Father of the Nation, would not under any circumstances let the newly independent country move on. Stories of a destitute named Bashanti made the rounds. Moulana Bhashami, through his public pronouncements and his weekly newspaper *Haq Katha*, made sure that the wounds inflicted on the government went increasingly deeper.

Abroad, there was once more the fear that Bangladesh's bid to enter the United Nations would again be vetoed by the Chinese. In the event, the veto did not come this time. But other difficulties remained. The Pakistani government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto sent out emissaries (and they were the Bengali collaborators of the Pakistan army in 1971 then stranded in Pakistan) to the Middle East to disseminate the propaganda that Bangladesh was a client state of India, that Hindus ran the show. On the home front, leftwing extremists led by Siraj Sikdar were increasingly going for an enhancement in their activities against the state. Abdul Haq, leader of another faction of leftists and one who had never acknowledged the liberation of the country in 1971, wrote a letter to Bhutto soliciting Pakistani help in what he called ousting the Mujib government. A happy Bhutto discussed the letter with his cabinet and decreed that Haq's request be looked into. As for the United States, it would not let a ship carrying food to a hungry Bangladesh reach the country because Dhaka had decided to do business with Fidel Castro.

In 1974, Bangabandhu's unambiguous decision to improve ties with the

West, especially Washington, led him into a crisis with Finance Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, whose conviction remained that Bangladesh ought to pursue a path of socialist development rather than warm up to countries which had refused to back its desperate armed struggle against Pakistan in 1971. He was overruled and was soon out of the cabinet. And then there were the reports of corruption on the part of Awami League politicians and workers across the country, to a point where



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Bangabandhu himself lamented the pilferage of relief goods by those around him. And, of course, adding to the chaos was the radical but confused, youth-driven Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal with its inexplicable slogan of scientific socialism. Towards the end of the year, Bangabandhu would have a state of emergency imposed on the country. He was busy fighting the demons arrayed around him.

Thirty eight years on, another Awami League government battles not just enemies within but also without. Sheikh Hasina's government, rocked by the doings and sayings of some of its own functionaries, needs to learn quite a few lessons from the

travails which eventually created the grounds for the collapse of Bangabandhu's administration more than three decades ago in 1975. And those lessons take on special meaning given that Sheikh Hasina and her government are under pressure not merely from the consequences of their own acts but also from forces ranged against them at home and abroad. There are those in the anti-Awami League camp eagerly waiting to see the on-going war crimes trials grind to a stop by the time the next



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general election comes round. For the government, there is an obvious need here to ensure that the trials proceed in a manner that is above question and that reflects the general desire of Bangladesh's people for justice to be ensured for those who died in 1971 and for their families.

The triumph of the Awami League at the elections of 1996 and 2008 were symbolic of a restoration, in however diluted a form, of the secular principles ingrained in the War of Liberation. For that momentum to be sustained, it is for the Awami League to reinvent itself, between now and the elections, into an inclusive organisation that will rise above the parochial image it has carved for itself in

these past few years. Sadly, though, the incompetence of a good number of ministers as also the bellicosity with which the ruling party has treated the opposition (however stubborn the opposition might have been) has ended up drilling a few more holes in the boat. With nothing to show for a cabinet reshuffle, with tainted ministers staying on and with bright young men opting out (read Sohail Taj here), the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina has looked more and more like a dinosaur.

To have a chance of returning to power in 2014, Sheikh Hasina and her party must be ready for a demonstration of political courage. The prime minister will need to dump a good number of ministers and ministers of state from the cabinet. She ought not to expect that people who have suffered at the hands of the rowdier elements of the Jubo League and Chhatra League will have forgotten their anguish by election time. The ruling party will need to engage the opposition in a meaningful dialogue over the modalities of a transition from an outgoing elected government to a freshly elected one. It must come round to the idea that hostility toward the media could turn out to be counter-productive, as recent history has demonstrated in Bangladesh.

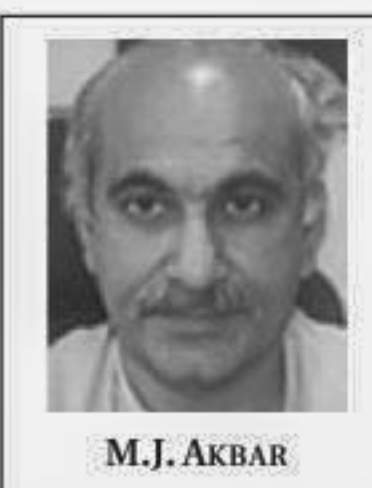
And then there are the structural readjustments the ruling party must go into, sooner rather than later. That fundamentally entails an overhaul of the cabinet, through reducing its size, through slicing off the fat clogging its arteries. Much of the criticism over the government's performance or the lack of it has had to do with the presence of the prime minister's advisers. They need to be dropped, all of them with briskness.

In 1974, the Awami League, new to power and glory, found itself in the woods for little fault of its own. In 2012, that is not what you can say about the party as it operates today. Bangabandhu fell because of the conspiracies against him. With Sheikh Hasina, the problem has basically been one of leadership without vision.

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BYLINE

Time for another government



M.J. AKBAR

THERE are enough saints to fill a thick register, but few who etch an impression on the collective memory. St Augustine, who

lived between 354 and 430, has left such an indelible mark that no anthology of quotations is complete without him. One prayer, recorded for posterity in Book 3 of Confessions, bears the burden of any immortal aphorism; it is almost always misquoted, although never misrepresented. Augustine prays to the Lord: "Give me chastity and continency -- but not yet!"

This could serve as the motto of any government in Delhi. Every minister wants to be chaste and honest, but only after he is out of office. When in power ministers install a taxi meter outside their cabins, clocking up a running account of payments that go into their private pockets. UPA 2 has become the dark and fetid nemesis of UPA 1.

Scams are born fast. The initial deal is done quickly enough. It does not take long to communicate intention on both sides; brokers are efficient. If any time is lost, it is only in the haggle. The sums involved, after all, are staggering. But since both sides know that they are going to do the deal in any case, negotiations end within a reasonable time-frame. What takes time is the unravelling of the scam.

The business project has to shift from paper to ground; and then begin to deliver. Someone has to complain. The relevant police or anti-corruption agency has to be persuaded to take the complaint seriously.

It then takes years for a body like CAG to put together a meticulous report that can withstand the scrutiny of those who are going to be exposed; bribe-givers and bribe-takers invest a lot in legal advice and PR management to save their thin skins. And even after exposure, the revelations may not quite catch fire instantly. The massive scam in coal blocks has been

In 2009, Dr Singh had a track record he could campaign on. By 2012, this record has been so vitiated that the Congress cannot go to the people and ask for their vote. They will not give it, either. Mrs Sonia Gandhi recognises this.

He has been the senior minister in charge of coal ever since Shibu Soren resigned. If this massive loot took place under his watch, then he has to be accountable. If he signed away the nation's resources, then he has to answer, even if others took the loot. The only response he might have, and it may even be an honest one, is that he did not read the files; but that is inadequate.

It is ironic that a Prime Minister who has often claimed, publicly, that his life is an open book should preside over a government that is nothing but an unending series of closed books.

No government since 1947 has had such a continuous record of corruption; a venal sin now compounded by collapse of governance. In 2009, Dr Singh had a track record he could campaign on. By 2012, this record has been so vitiated that the Congress cannot go to the people and ask for their vote. They will not give it, either.

Mrs Sonia Gandhi recognises this. Her body language at even core group meetings indicates her total frustration. She knows that the time has come to change the government; because if she does not change it, the

people will, and when they do so even tatters might not be visible.

The political calendar provides an opportunity. A President is due to be elected. Congress silence about its candidate has led to speculation about all sorts of hidden horses, some dark, others speckled, and even a couple which are visibly lame but still insistent that they are in the race. Mrs Gandhi can do her party a world of good by promoting Dr Singh to Rashtrapati Bhavan, and then installing a radically different government. She has a natural successor in Pranab Mukherjee. While the chattering classes insist that there is a gulf of suspicion between the two, surely they have now worked together long enough to put sentiment aside. Politics is a hard place. It needs cool decisions. Mrs Gandhi does not have options, as Dr Singh's replacement must be acceptable to allies and, more important, the people of the country. She may want to see her son Rahul Gandhi as PM, but that idea will not walk in the immediate future. Rahul Gandhi could have won his spurs in UP. He did not.

This transition to a Mukherjee can happen in mid-June. It may not, to repeat another memorable quote, this time from the Second World War leader Winston Churchill, mark the beginning of the end, but it could end the disastrous beginning of UPA 2.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

June 6

- 1674**
Shivaji, founder of the Maratha empire is crowned.
- 1942**
World War II: Battle of Midway. U.S. Navy dive bombers sink the Japanese cruiser Mikuma and four Japanese carriers.
- 1944**
World War II: Battle of Normandy begins. D-Day, code named Operation Overlord, commences with the landing of 155,000 Allied troops on the beaches of Normandy in France.
- 1971**
Vietnam War: The Battle of Long Khanh between Australian and Vietnamese communist forces begins.
- 1981**
Bihar train disaster A passenger train travelling between Mansi and Saharsa, India, jumps the tracks at a bridge crossing the Bagmati river.
- 1982**
Lebanon War begins: Forces under Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon invade southern Lebanon in their "Operation Peace for the Galilee", eventually reaching as far north as the capital Beirut.
- 2004**
Tamil is established as a Classical language by the President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in a joint sitting of the two houses of the Indian Parliament.