

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

# Have we all gone nuts?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**S**YMPATHISERS crowd into the room of a seriously ill patient at a hospital gasping on a thin edge of recuperation or, perhaps just sinking. The visitors would be discouraged with a standard piece of advice: patient has need for treatment, not for a jostle around his or her bedside. As well as being obstructive to a treatment regimen he or she has been placed on, it can also be demanding on the patient's last ounces of energy.

Similarly, the Padma Bridge project is on a sick bed -- thanks to evasive handling and uncalibrated response in the aftermath of WB's cancellation of loan. Whereas it should be handled with utmost care, almost everybody is in a rage to register his or her contribution to the verbal duels as if that can bring tangible progress towards a viable solution of the crisis!

Beating about the bush, never coming to the point has become a national pastime. Lest we soon wear it as a badge of national identity, liabilities to national image being already overwhelming, it's time politicians pull back their wagging tongues!

What World Bank's indictment on the government's handling of Padma Bridge project could not do, has been done squarely through our own conduct. More harm is done to the goodwill of a nation by irresponsible and incoherent utterances of those who are supposed to lead, not create problems for us. No interna-

tional institution or a foreign country worth its salt would confuse goodwill for a nation with any particular government's conduct because the people and the country transcend any government. It will, therefore, be fallacious to entertain the idea that the country and the people are being deliberately punished by the World Bank. Some of its previously lacked transparency track record leading to creation of the 'integrity vice presidency' notwithstanding.

Various conspiratorial theories are making rounds, some so absurd that people are left completely bewildered. They feel being fooled around, their intelligence insulted!

Two contradictions stand out in the government's approach: first, the prime minister and the finance minister are apparently not on the same page. The PM is charging the World Bank with hoodwinking and pointed a finger of suspicion to 'somebody' who she thinks has instigated the WB's decision. To the best of our knowledge, the finance minister is trying to keep the WB option ticking. If it is a matter of strategy it couldn't be a good one to be sure.

On another level, ministers, with or without portfolios, having no link to Padma Bridge are talking out of

turn, or out of hat or more to the point, setting the sail to the headwind of the prime minister's rather misplaced blistering reaction.

Here are some of the samples -- thick with politics, wafer-thin on economics. Food Minister Abdur Razzak reportedly said the other day, "Those who want to make Bangladesh into a Pakistan or a failed state are conspiring about Padma Bridge." The AL's veteran presidium member Sajeda Chowdhury gave two hoots to the US. Suranjit Sen Gupta is no person to lag

behind in reeling off such stuff.

At the other pole, BNP leaders and loyalists are castigating the government in a way as though they have got themselves a windfall in the upset timetable for the dream project

they apparently want botched up.

Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia was first to directly link the prime minister and her family to the scandal. Picking up from her, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam claims that World Bank letters have mentioned the names of prime minister, finance minister and the ex communication minister Abul Hossain. Even if this is taken at the face value the question is in what context, if any, the names have appeared in World Bank's communication. In the

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## Long road to safe maternal care

SHAVEENA ANAM

**W**ORLD Population Day is all about raising awareness about universal access to reproductive health services and building a world where every pregnancy is wanted and every childbirth is safe.

According to statistics from UNFPA, reproductive health problems remain the leading cause of ill health and death for women of childbearing age worldwide. Here are some terrifying statistics: 358,000 women die every year from pregnancy related causes. Some 222 million women in the developing world want to avoid or plan pregnancies but cannot to do so because of lack of safe, affordable and accessible methods of family planning. That is 222 million women who had no other choice but to give birth to a child when they didn't want. And meeting this need would result in 53 million fewer unintended pregnancies.

Nearly 800 women die everyday in the process of child birth from bleeding, infections, unsafe abortions, high blood pressure and obstructed labour; which are all highly preventable or treatable with adequate care and medicines.

Let the numbers sink in while I bring the issue closer to home. Maternal care is difficult to reach if you are poor and virtually non-existent if you are extreme poor. While working with an organisation that aims to reduce extreme poverty, I've met 14-year old mothers in Barisal, disabled mothers of large families in urban slums and too many women who have had miscarriages or lost children because of malnutrition and inadequate health care.

To portray the situation, I borrow from a research paper done by Nuzhat Chowdhury and Syed M. Ahmed, titled "Maternal care practices among the ultra poor households in rural Bangladesh," which explores the maternal care practices among the ultra poor in Bangladesh. Extreme poor women are marginalised compared to the national rural average in terms of accessing antenatal care (37% for ultra poor women and 60% national rural women), institutional delivery (5% from lowest wealth quintile and 15% national rural average), receiving iron supplementation during last pregnancy (53% for ultra poor and 55% national rural women), and use of contraceptive prevalence (63% for ultra poor and 80% ever-married women in Bangladesh). If anyone is need of quality reproductive health care, it's the extreme poor women of Bangladesh.

The following findings are based on the report from interviews with women in Kurigram. The respondents considered pregnancy as a common event and, aside from confirming the pregnancy, refrained from seeking antenatal care or medical advice.

This avoidance was due to a combination of financial constraints and traditional beliefs. On practices during childbirth, the women reported that most deliveries took place on the floor in the squatting posture and the attendants seldom washed their hands before delivering babies. Women avoided going to healthcare providers if they got ill after childbirth because they felt the process of pregnancy didn't really need additional medical intervention unless serious complications arose.

Even if the new mothers were in any pain or fell ill after delivery they didn't seek any medical help; mostly

because they took the discomfort to be a natural symptom of the pregnancy, but many didn't go for check up because they were not even aware that post partum checkups were available. There is a dearth of information on maternal care practices of the marginalised women from ultra poor households in rural Bangladesh.

Ingrained traditional beliefs and superstitions can also shape practices related to pregnancy. As in many Bangladeshi homes, regardless of socio economic status, the elderly *murobbi* women in the family take control of the pregnancy dictating what, how, when, where and who, imposing restrictions based on their own experiences and superstitions.

For instance, eclipses are believed to effect pregnant women; the ladies reported staying at home or not lying on their own bed during eclipses. There is belief that cooking, cutting and twisting or eating certain things can lead to the child being born with a cleft palate or deformed features and so their movement and diet are controlled. A belief that the placenta could possibly choke the mother from the inside has lead to harmful practices to expel the placenta after delivery.

There have been cases where relatives massaged the abdomen of the mother, or gagged her with her hair or made her consume kerosene oil or onion juice to induce vomiting so that placenta comes out through abdominal contractions.

Monetary constraints, absence of knowledge about the necessity of services and restrictions on the movement of women were identified as reasons for not accessing antenatal care. The report also cites poor attitudes from healthcare staff such as using abusive language, denying services and assistance and lacking compassion in general as a reason for why women tend to avoid seeking healthcare. Women should feel free to share their problems, whatever they may be, with health care providers.

While it is already a priority of the government to address maternal healthcare and proper population control mechanisms, we need to do our part to make sure that the appropriate information is available to all parts of the country. The study iterates what we already know; that affluence and socio cultural factors play a significant role in maternal care practices, that dire poverty and social exclusion push mothers away from proper care during and after pregnancy.

This government is committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, but we have a long...long way to go. So to whoever is reading, be horrified by the aforementioned statistics, feel lucky that you have the knowledge and luxury to be horrified, and then do something about it, in whatever way you are able to.

The problems identified can be traced back to the lack of sufficient resources for healthcare in most parts of Bangladesh (which the government needs to address!) and the general lack of knowledge about the issue. We need to make sure that our mothers, daughters, nieces, maids, students, patients -- basically all the females in our lives -- are aware of the proper health care practices, and that the government is held accountable for facilitating those, so that no one has to have a child when they don't want one and no one has to fall ill or die from an unsafe childbirth.

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## Professor Yunus, Grameen and social business

S. M. RASHED AHMED

**M**UCH has been written and said about our Nobel laureate Prof. Yunus and Grameen; hence I am not quite sure from where to begin. In the history of human endeavour so much is owed to this single individual who, through his innovative approaches for creating a world without poverty, has set in motion an irreversible process for a quiet revolution for historic social change.

It is no exaggeration to say that the name of Bangladesh has become synonymous with Prof. Yunus and Grameen. This is based on my personal experience of years in the diplomatic service.

In this context, I wish to record two events which stand out in my memory. The first one is from when I was Bangladesh ambassador to Japan. It is customary in Japan for their Imperial Majesties to host a luncheon for the ambassador and his wife. During a cordial luncheon meeting both Imperial Majesties devoted most of the time to a discussion on Grameen and Prof. Yunus. We were fortunate to have been able to apprise them of the work of Grameen and its pioneer as Prof. Yunus had visited Japan earlier.

The other event, which was to leave an indelible imprint on my mind about Grameen was when I took up my assignment with UN in Kosovo. To my surprise, I was warmly greeted by the local K Albanians and the K Serbians including the Monks of the Monastery, where foreign persons were looked upon with suspicion. The reason for my acceptability, which I was to find out later, was that Grameen Bank had established its presence in that area before I went there. They knew about Bangladesh and Prof. Yunus. The poor women were earning their livelihood from the microcredit programme where jobs were scarce. My wide public acceptance as the UN administrator helped in resolving the conflict through face to face dialogue and negotiations. Thanks to Grameen.

During my assignment Prof. Yunus visited Kosovo twice. I was told by the SRSR Steiner and other colleagues that they were deeply impressed by the vision and commitment of Prof. Yunus to the eradication of global poverty and for peace.

Recently, at the "Social Business Day 2012" at Savar, which incidentally coincided with the birthday of Prof. Yunus, I joined his numerous friends and well wishers to celebrate the achievements in Social Business from around the world. I will briefly touch on the opening ceremony and the Social Business based on my rudimentary knowledge of the subject.

The presence of such a large number of national and foreign participants; the signing of MOU on a Social Business Project in Haiti, which in the words of Prof. Yunus was a "seed from Bangladesh being planted in Haiti"; the presence of Astronaut Garan who read Prof. Yunus' book *Creating a world without poverty* in the space station and committed to help the poor through Social Business; the starting of Social Business by Japanese company Felissimo Corporation; the reiteration of financial commitment and support to Social Business project by the Managing Director, Grameen Credit Agricole Microfinance Foundation (France); and support to Social Business project by others including Patricia Lynch, Vice President, Kaiser Permanente, USA, Eric Lesueur, Project Director, Veolia Water, France, Rokia Rahman, Chairman, Media World Ltd, Bangladesh, who

spoke about her intention to start a Social Business project involving supply of seeds and fertilizers to the poor farmers; the notable presence of Ambassador Shiro Sadoshima of Japan, which underscored the support of the Japanese government to the concept of the Social Business, were events of great significance for Grameen, and its founder.

Like Grameen, the idea of Social Business is increasingly gaining acceptability around the world. As Prof. Yunus himself explained, the economic and financial crisis in Europe and the West impacts negatively on the poor in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The system based on traditional capitalism has failed to meet the challenges facing humanity; it is time to redesign a "new kind of capitalism that serves humanity's most pressing needs." This will change the current money-centric system and reverse it by putting money in its place and human beings as the basis of the new capitalism; profit seeking motive will be replaced by motive of serving the poor and the vulnerable. Social Business is aimed at addressing the problems of global poverty, development, environmental hazards, health care, safe drinking water, intertwined with economics, finance, food and agriculture, energy, and massive youth unemployment and social crisis, etc.

That the social business concept is catching up globally it is clear from the fact that it is being "adopted by leading corporations including BASF, Intel, Danone, Veolia, and Adidas as well as entrepreneurs and social activists in various parts of the world. Significantly, the idea of Social Business is being embraced at the highest academic levels abroad. To cite some examples: the Grameen Creative Lab (GCL) at Weisbaden; Glasgow Caledonian University partnering with Grameen on a Social Business project aimed at enhancing healthcare in Bangladesh; the new California Institute of Social Business based at the California State University Channel Islands Campus; Kyushu University in Fukuoka, Japan, creating a Grameen Technology Lab partnering with Japanese companies; Yunus Center at the AIT Bangkok and HEC, the prestigious international business school in Paris creating a Social Business chair. For a fuller understanding of the Social Business concept it will be worthwhile to read the book *Building Social Business* by Prof Yunus and to contact the Yunus Center at Grameen HQ Dhaka.

Prof. Yunus is not only the pride possession of Bangladesh but also of the world at large. Let us forge a national consensus on preserving the integrity, independence and autonomy of Grameen. Let us utilise the precious service of our only Nobel laureate to strengthen Bangladesh, particularly by lifting its international image which has been badly bruised by the unacceptable controversy created about him and Grameen. Crucially, it will help realise the twin objectives of our foreign policy, i.e security and development. Security, particularly non-military, involves poverty, development, safe water, food, energy and climate change. We need to work collectively to achieve a functional democracy based on the rule of law, good governance and human rights, strong economy and a credible defense force to achieve the national aspirations of a strong, peaceful, stable, self-reliant, multi-religious and multi-cultural Bangladesh.

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