

BUET turmoil

VC's obstinacy unacceptable

IT is indeed worrying that the turmoil in BUET that has been going on for five months has not yet been solved, and is, in fact, getting more complicated by the day. Although in keeping with the High Court order the teachers had suspended their agitation programmes classes have not resumed and procession and sit-ins by the students still continue.

The point at issue is the credibility of the VC against whom the teachers have brought as many as sixteen allegations related to corruption of various natures including tampering with mark sheets. And one wonders how an objective enquiry against the head of the institution to ascertain the truth can be launched with him being in office.

We also notice with great deal of consternation the infusion of violence with the induction of BCL cadres who couldn't have gone on an offensive posture, we believe, without the sponsorship of the authorities. Filing of two cases by the security officer of BUET against a large number of unnamed teachers and students, for ransacking the VC office, has compounded the situation further.

We find it hard to rationalise the inertia of the government, particularly the education ministry, to find a solution of the matter that has virtually reached a crisis point. Regrettably, there has been no palpable action on the part of the ministry, except for articulation of hope, to address the root cause of the crisis.

We are also dismayed by the obstinacy of the VC and his deputy, whose stubbornness has held the premier institution of the country and the thousand of students hostage since April of this year. We have said in the past and reiterate once again that the VC is not merely a person. He holds an exalted position that largely rests on his credibility as an administrator and the confidence he enjoys of the teachers and the students. There is very little doubt in our minds that he has lost both and has thus forfeited the moral ground to remain in his position.

We do not see of any other way that might resolve the impasse, but for the VC and his deputy to go. And this the VC and the minister of education must understand. It is perhaps time too that the prime minister intervened to save BUET from considerable damage which the continuing situation is bound to inflict.

Medical admission tests restored at last

Lessons should be learnt to avoid repetition

WE welcome the government's revised decision to hold admission tests for students enrolling at medical and dental colleges this year as in past years. The fact that the change in the government's unthinking declaration comes in the face of a prolonged and at times violent agitation by students, however, sets a bad precedent.

Enrolment through admission tests is the normative process in our country's education system and, if this was to be changed, it should not have been done through a sudden announcement which took students by surprise. Thus, though the idea to base admission on combined GPA of SSC and HSC results may have been well-thought-out, it was not well-executed, resulting in the students erupting in agitation which could have been avoided.

On the other hand, the fact that the students went berserk, engaging in violence and vandalising property, is unacceptable. There are several means of peaceful protest and demand for rights which were obviously not the chosen option here. The worst message conveyed through the government's giving in to the students' demands at this extreme point, seems to be that violence and vandalism is the way to be heard and have demands met.

We are glad that this episode has ended and hope that there will not be a repetition of such a situation. The lesson to be learnt from all this is that we may have to change our way of doing things. The system cannot be changed at whim, and if it is to be changed for the better, enough thought and time must be given to the process in order to avoid a boomerang effect. The people on the receiving end, too, must give change a chance and not react unreasonably and violently, which ultimately

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 4

1870 Emperor Napoleon III of France is deposed and the Third Republic is declared.

1912 Albanian rebels succeed in their revolt when the Ottoman Empire agrees to fulfill their demands

1919 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey, gathers a congress in Sivas to make decisions as to the future of Anatolia and Thrace.

1967 Vietnam War: Operation Swift begins: U.S. Marines engage the North Vietnamese in battle in the Que Son Valley.

1975 The Sinai Interim Agreement relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict is signed.

1989 In Leipzig, East Germany, the first of weekly demonstration for the legalisation of opposition groups and democratic reforms takes place.

Food wastage puts food security at risk



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

we would soon be facing a re-run of the 2008 food crisis, it is ironic to find that, according to Food and Agriculture Organisation data, as much as 30-40% of the global food production is wasted annually. Roughly translated, that is 1.3 billion tonnes of food getting lost in the supply chain or wasted for multifarious reasons. When one considers that globally about a billion people go to bed hungry and some 3 billion people are undernourished, such wastage becomes unacceptable. It is interesting to note is that the amount of food wastage is nearly at par between developed and developing countries with 670 and 630 million tonnes respectively. However, food wastage by consumers in rich countries stands at 222 million tonnes that is equivalent to practically the total food production of sub-Saharan Africa, i.e. 230 million tonnes. In case of industrialised countries, the bulk of wastage occurs at the consumption level, whereas for low-income countries, the substantial losses occur at early and middle stages of the supply chain and not so much at consumer level.

In developing countries, most of the food losses occur at production, harvest, post-harvest and processing phases due to a variety of inadequacies: poor infrastructure, low levels of technology and low investment in the

food production system. Chronic food deficiency and the desperate need for cash during the second half of the agriculture season prompts many poor farmers in developing countries to harvest crops too early, resulting in loss of food that is not suitable for consumption. One of the ways to counter this is for resource-poor farmers to organise into groups so that they may avail credit from agricultural financial institutions.

Next is the issue of poor storage facilities and transportation. Poor infrastructure in developing nations automatically translates into fresh products with limited shelf life such as fruits, vegetables, meat and fish

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that can readily go to waste in hot climates due to a lack of transportation, proper storage, adequate cooling and access to markets. This requires government intervention in terms of making investments to improve infrastructure and transportation by improving roads, widening access to energy and markets. Once these are in place, the private sector can make investments in improving storage facilities that include cold storage. For instance, in Bangladesh, rickshaw vans are used to transport milk from the countryside to processing plants to Baghabari ghat. Transporting such a perishable item in the warm and humid climate without benefit of a proper cold chain inevitably causes some losses. Again, the fact that rickshaws must traverse long distances

along narrow and winding roads inevitably prolongs the time between collection of milk and delivery to processing plants results in some losses.

The lack of proper market systems in developing nations is one of the major contributing factors to food losses. With few wholesale supermarket and retail facilities boasting appropriate storage and sales conditions, it is inevitable that such centres are overcrowded and not suitable to storing produce under ideal conditions. Given infrastructure constraints common to practically all developing nations, marketing cooperatives provide the ideal solution for small farm-

ers to assemble agricultural products in designated locations which can then be transported in bulk to markets. Marketing cooperatives should aid in reducing food losses significantly.

The causes of food loss or wastage in industrialised countries offer a whole different set of dynamics. Supermarkets dominate the wholesale and retail scene in developed countries, where "appearance quality standards" play a dominant role in deciding which fresh products get shelf life. Stringent requirements on weight, size and shape of products are mandatory, resulting in large portions of crop never entering the food chain. This calls for a significant change in business attitude. In his book Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal,

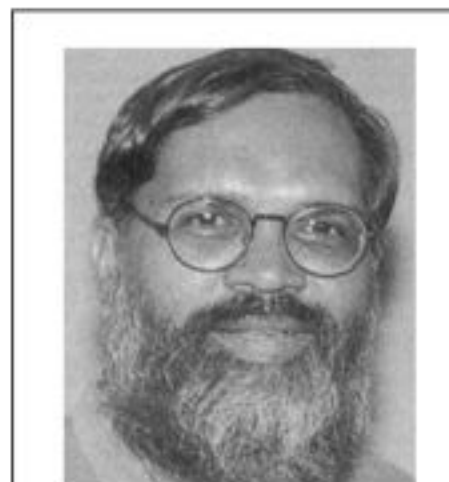
Tristram Stuart explains that consumers are more concerned with "taste," rather than "shape." Given this wrong perception of what consumers will accept or reject, the food processing industry engages in "trimming" which involves rejection of food due to their wrong size, shape, weight and damaged packaging. Since processing lines in industry are programmed to accept agro products conforming to certain weight and size parameters, much food gets discarded. One of the ways out of this dilemma would be to work out a system whereby charities can collect and sell such products with a different labelling.

Stuart found other disturbing facts. Consumers expect to see a wide range of products to be on display in shops and supermarkets. The downside to this overstocking of produce is that many products do not get sold before expiry date and are inevitably thrown away. Consumer indifference to seeing a lot of food go to waste in rich countries has a lot to do with the fact that such wastage is affordable. Examples are everywhere. Retail stores encourage purchasing of more products than is required by the consumer with bundle offers and continuing in this tradition, food manufacturers produce oversized ready-to-eat meals which do not get consumed fully. Such attitudes cannot be changed overnight. Raising public awareness will need policy initiatives that could include specific curricula to be introduced in the schooling system. Consumers must be taught that throwing food away needlessly is simply not acceptable.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

People speak out against N-power



PRAFUL BIDWAI

it's manifestly mistaken. Three important developments have put the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL) in the dock.

First, the National Committee in Solidarity with the Jaitapur Struggle, comprising Centre-Left leaders and experts, issued a powerful statement against the proposed Jaitapur project in Maharashtra, based on six 1,650 megawatt reactors of the French company Areva.

Second, India's first big People's Hearing on all major nuclear plants was held on August 22 in Delhi. This intensified the growing anti-nuclear public sentiment and developed an informed consensus on alternatives.

Third, the Comptroller and Auditor General published a report on the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, documenting organisational flaws and sloppy practices, and questioning the safety of India's perennially crisis-bound, accident-prone, money-guzzling nuclear power programme.

The National Committee on Jaitapur includes heavyweights like Communist leaders Prakash Karat and A.B. Bardhan, and lawmakers from half-a-dozen parties, besides independent scientists. It holds the project wasn't subjected to "independent rigorous" scientific scrutiny or a "safety audit," but cleared on the basis of an "unscientific and deeply flawed Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Report."

It argues that Areva's "untested" European Pressurised Reactor design has raised "serious concerns" in various countries and even in "an internal audit of the French nuclear industry." EPRs under construction in Finland and France are in dire trouble, with four-year-plus delays and 130%-plus cost overruns. Areva has announced major job cuts and project

cancellations, and is close to bankruptcy, having lost 90% of its share value since 2007. The EPR would probably fail "even an elementary test of techno-economic due diligence."

At Jaitapur, multiple reactors will be erected, aggravating hazards, as in Fukushima. The EPR has a flawed design for spent-fuel storage. As Fukushima showed, this hazard "is not less than that from the reactor itself."

NPCIL dismisses seismic hazards at Jaitapur. But eminent geophysicists Vinod Gaur and Roger Bilham argue

The jurors recommended a moratorium on new nuclear projects and a thorough, independent review of all existing nuclear installations. No project must be pushed without prior, informed consent of people. All false cases against protestors must be withdrawn.

in a peer-reviewed journal that a severe earthquake can occur at Jaitapur.

The EPRs' capital costs would be Rs. 24 crores per MW, compared to Rs. 9 crores for indigenous reactors. This will make Jaitapur's power ruinously expensive.

These arguments are unassailable. But NPCIL is imposing the project on unwilling people while violating their fundamental rights.

Logically, the National Committee in Solidarity with the Jaitapur Struggle should extend similar arguments to the Koodankulam reactors in Tamil Nadu and demand their scrapping. There was at least an EIA for Jaitapur, but not even a token one for Koodankulam.

Like all Russian reactors, the Koodankulam reactors probably have numerous design flaws, including inadequate emergency cooling, poor

evacuation procedures, and non-factoring of earthquake hazards.

The first reactor's pressure vessel has a weld in the middle, which is impermissible. Serious questions have been raised about volcanic activity near Koodankulam, its vulnerability to tsunamis, and the crucial absence of an independent freshwater source. The station will depend on seawater desalination. This can fail; and there's no backup.

NPCIL has failed to furnish vital documents to the public including the Site Evaluation and Safety Analysis Reports, although directed to do so by the Central Information Commission. It also didn't conduct the mandatory off-site emergency evacuation drill within a 16-kilometre zone.

The government set up sarkari scientists' committees to assure the public of the plant's safety. This was a sham. They never met the people. Meanwhile, the police has framed false charges including "waging war on the state" against thousands.

Shamefully, in breach of its own procedures, the AERB has permitted NPCIL to start loading nuclear fuel into the first reactor. This is characteristic of the irresponsible functioning of the nuclear establishment.

This functioning, marked by non-transparency, evasion, deception, outright lies -- and repression -- came in for incisive criticism at the People's Hearing in Delhi. This was attended by scores of activists from Gorakhpur-Fatehabad (Haryana), Chutka (Madhya Pradesh), Kovvada (Andhra), Banswara and Rawatbhata (Rajasthan), and Haripur (West Bengal), besides Koodankulam and Jaitapur.

In Gorakhpur, daily protests have completed two years, just as a relay hunger-strike clocked a year in Koodankulam. Jaitapur has witnessed anti-nuclear protests since 2007, and Haripur since 2006.

The activists' testimonies, supplemented by expert opinions, were heard by jurors comprising Aruna Roy, member of the UPA's National Advisory Council, L. Ramdas, former Indian Navy chief, and former Director General of Police K.S. Subramaniam.

The jurors recommended a mora-

torium on new nuclear projects and a thorough, independent review of all existing nuclear installations. No project must be pushed without prior, informed consent of people. All false cases against protestors must be withdrawn. There are safe, environmentally sound and far cheaper renewable alternatives to nuclear power.

The CAG indicts the AERB scathingly. The Board has betrayed its 1983 mandate to be the paramount standard-setting authority and independent safety regulator. Legally, it continues to be "subordinate to the central government," unlike in many other countries, and "has no rule-making powers."

The AERB never prepared an overall nuclear and radiation safety policy, as was required. It has failed to develop as many as 27 of the 168 Standards, Codes and Guides it itself declared essential.

The AERB has no independent budget, staff or equipment. It has no independent role in radiological surveillance and monitoring workers' health. It has no direct involvement in overseeing on-site emergency drills, nor the authority to get their inadequacies corrected.

Even for serious safety infringements, the penalties are absurdly low (e.g. Rs.500). The AERB doesn't have the powers of enforcement of penalties.

The AERB doesn't even have a full inventory of nuclear materials and radiation sources in India. Ninety-one percent of India's X-ray units aren't registered with it. It has developed no framework for decommissioning nuclear plants.

The AERB fails all reasonable criteria of an effective regulator. It's in such careless hands that the responsibility to protect millions of Indians against nuclear hazards is placed.

Postscript: A Parliamentary committee has heaped yet more ignominy on the government's slimy attempt to shield nuclear operators/suppliers by writing the Rules under the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act 2010 in ways that are incompatible with that law's spirit.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist. E-mail: bidwai@bol.net.in