

Buriganga left in the lurch

Reclamation project yet to take-off

SAVING the Buriganga river is vital to survival of the capital city. Yet ironically, two years into the much-talked about project to make Buriganga River pollution-free, it has hit a colossal snag. The nearly Tk.1000 crore project received financial allocation of Tk.100 crore over the last two years. It is hardly a wonder that a mere 5-6 per cent of the project has been completed.

Initiated back in 2009, the project envisioned to bring in fresh water to Buriganga to wash away the ever-increasing pollutants being dumped into the river. It involved dredging of a 162km stretch of water between Buriganga and Jamuna rivers and further dredging of 23km of the Pungli River. Pollution levels due primarily to indiscriminate dumping of untreated industrial-grade toxins into the river helped reach a situation whereby nine months out of a year it experienced zero oxygen level, which in other words made it a "dead" river.

Despite being touted as a priority project, the financing of such a resource-hungry project was not thought out clearly. The constant delays in providing allocation have now pushed the project deadline from June 2013 to June 2014. With this delay comes a huge escalation of dredging costs to the tune of Tk.500 crore. The project is yet another display of lack of project design and implementation. This sort of half-hearted attempt at redressing the serious issue of environmental degradation has not helped to mitigate the problems pollution has caused for Dhaka residents, particularly the issue of safe drinking water.

Admission test anomalies

Pvt. medical colleges compromise on quality

A report that 23 per cent of the students admitted into private medical colleges during 2012-13 academic session scored below 30 out of 100 marks in admission tests is disconcerting. Worse yet, there are instances where students passed the admission tests, though they obtained below 10 marks.

What the report has brought to the fore is something very scary for a profession that prided itself on possessing some of the best brains coming out of the intermediate level education.

Like the proverbial bad money driving good money out of circulation, these new entrants may one day occupy the centre stage of the medical profession thrusting the good ones aside. It simply boggles the mind!

One wonders how could they, on the health ministry's or directorate's watch, bend the rule that those obtaining below 60 per cent marks in nationally conducted admission tests may get admission in private medical universities in order of sequence?

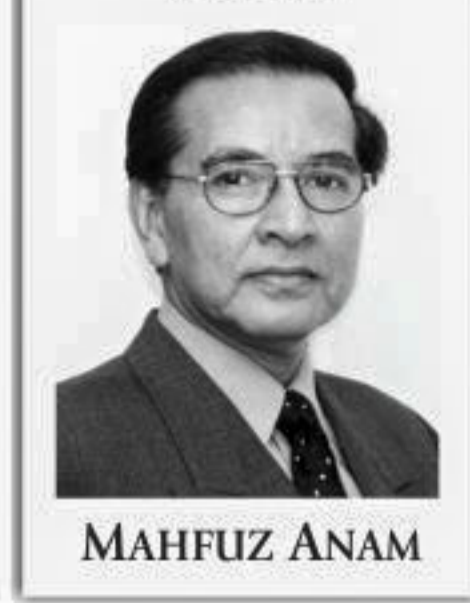
Needless to say, dubious elements in the top echelons of the health administration, professional bodies of doctors and some among senior professionals are behind this landslide in standard of admission tests at the private medical colleges.

The government, the health ministry, in particular, should look into the matter and take urgent measures to bring the admission process in the private medical colleges under discipline.

Is AL asking itself why it lost the latest elections?

From the looks of it, no

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

POLITICAL parties are supposed to be extremely sensitive to every turn and twist in public opinion. They are expected to keep a close watch on every expression of it in every public forum, both big and small. Most importantly, they are supposed to take every opinion poll for what it is, opinion poll, and not castigate those as work of the 'enemies.'

But, like so much else in our politics, reactions to opinion polls by our political parties are quite different from rest of the world. If the results are in favour, their reaction is positive and one of immediate acceptance. But if opposite is the case, all hell breaks loose. The findings are termed as concocted and the body that did the survey is condemned as a conspirator in league with the opposition.

Thus, when the Bangla daily Prothom Alo conducted an opinion poll some weeks back, showing that by far the greater majority of people support the idea of caretaker government (CTG) to conduct the next general election, the ruling Awami League and all its supporters launched a massive attack on the paper. There was no attempt to verify the authenticity of the survey. As events later proved, and continue to, Prothom Alo's findings were correct, and that CTG is the preferred form of government during elections.

Ignoring opinion polls is one thing, but to ignore election results can only be termed as suicidal. Regrettably, that is what we are seeing in the reaction of the Awami League after its massive defeat in the mayoral elections. After losing all five of them at a stretch, one would have thought that this once great party, with such a glorious history and huge support base, would have immediately launched a multilevel exercise in self-analysis as to why they lost.

There appears to be no attempt by the ruling party to investigate why this debacle occurred. A natural follow up after Gazipur defeat would have been a serious wake up call for the AL, leading to immediate formation of a high level party committee to make a detailed study on where the party went wrong -- was it in the choice of the candidate, was it in electioneering techniques, or in mishandling by party elders, etc.

Nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, the PM, who is also the party chief, started openly criticising the public saying something like, "what can I do if they do not support us in spite of all the good work we did." She even implied that people seem to prefer the corrupt instead of the honest. She said after Ramazan: "We will cut electric power and remind people how bad things were before. Then they will appreciate us."

The implication here is that it is the people who are at fault, not the party, and that voters are fools and that they don't understand what is good for them. Voters also cannot distinguish the good leaders from the bad. So foolish are the people that they even deserve to be punished -- hence the threat of cutting of electric power and reminding them of all the good works done by the present leadership.

So convinced are our rulers of the stupidity of our voters that the corrective measures they thought of adopting was not of 'introspection' but of better 'communication.'

The fault was identified as failure of communication and not one of performance. There was no need to correct their ways, but only to tell the people what great things they have done. Thus was sown the seed of the 'great' billboard hijack. The net result was, whatever truth there was in the hundreds of messages contained in the thousands of 'hijacked' billboards, were lost because of the unethical methods adopted in 'capturing' what really were other people's property.

In a reaction that still stupefies the mind, AL has undertaken no public action to indicate that it has taken to heart the messages emanating from the last five election defeats. Questions linger as to how a political party can be so indifferent to such clear and blatant show of public disillusionment and remain so complacent as not to undertake a single measure of self evaluation.

Is it that AL is so possessed by its sense of self righteousness, so enamoured with its own perceived self image, so intoxicated by self praise, so immersed in its own ego, that it has become totally deaf to what people are saying?

How could that have happened? Only four and half years ago this party was in the hearts and minds of such an overwhelming number of our people that AL, by itself, got two third majority in the parliament, and a whopping four fifth with its allies.

If we were to identify a single reason for this dramatic fall, in our judgement it would be "arrogance," pure and simple, that has brought AL to its knees. If it is not shunned immediately, it will be arrogance that will spell its ultimate electoral defeat in the next polls. Unless it is able to come down from its high horse of self-righteousness and swallow its unfounded pride of "we can do no wrong," and really come closer to the people and listen to what they are saying, there is no way that the present ruling party can regain anything close to its popularity of four and half years ago. Stop thinking of voters as fools, and start thinking of where you have gone wrong. Stop blaming the media and start listening to what they are saying.

Speeches of AL leaders are still full of venom for others. Everything wrong is to be blamed on others, every failure is somebody else's fault, every crime, by definition, has to be committed by others. The first and the most important thing that AL needs to do is stop believing in its own propaganda. Some of it is outright false, most of it is exaggerated, and the portion that is true has been obliterated by big mistakes like the Padma Bridge, Stock Market scam, Sonali Bank, Destiny, Rana Plaza, not to mention Prof. Yunus.

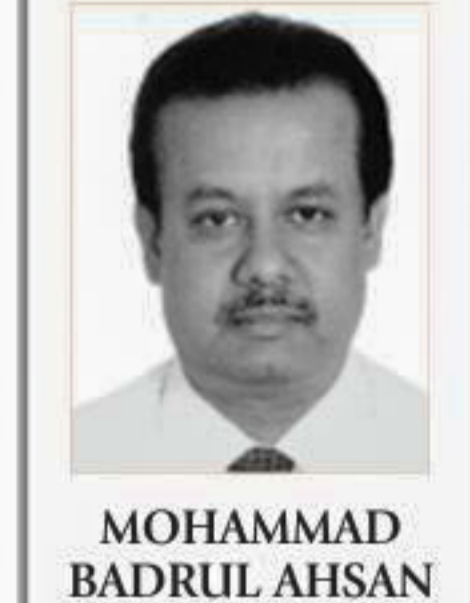
If Awami League sincerely wants to, and hopes to, turn things around, it must begin by asking where it has gone wrong and how it has lost such a large number of its supporters. Only by accepting that the real reason for the dwindling public support lies within itself, can it start finding answers that may ultimately help it.

To continue to bask in the illusion of self flattery is only to risk obliteration. The writings are on the wall. What AL now needs is the willingness to read them.

The writer is Editor, The Daily Star.

Journalism in jitters

CROSS TALK



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

NEWS business is turning into its own nemesis. After 80 years the Graham family sold *The Washington Post* in the first week of this month. Two days before that the *Boston Globe*, founded in 1872, got a new owner. *Newsweek* became history umpteen months ago. *Time* Magazine reduced its staff size by 5% early this year and then discontinued its cartoon section from last June to further cut costs. The news industry all over the world is in jitters. Not just that the giants in the business are incredibly shrinking. News is also shrinking with them.

What's happening in America won't simultaneously happen in other countries. It'll follow the evolutionary path, contraction being gradual to some extent as expansion, until advanced becomes backward and necessary becomes redundant. The news business is heading for the twilight in mature markets, but it's still nascent in other parts of the world. In Bangladesh, for example, newspapers and magazines are being launched by the month (less frequent for television channels). Media power is the new hobbyhorse of our moneyed men.

It's probably the halfway house where giants are meeting midgets: The news value of news is getting compromised. The Pew Research Center in its "The State of the News Media 2013" report estimated that the news industry in the United States suffered 30% newspaper newsroom cutbacks since 2000, professional employees hitting below 40,000 for the first time since 1978. The television channels aren't spared either, which is heavily reflected in their contents. Sports, weather and traffic now account for nearly 40% of the contents produced on the newscasts studied, while story lengths continue to get squeezed. Between 2007 and 2012, CNN, the cable channel that made its name for deep reporting, reduced story packages nearly into half.

Once proud of their ability to sink teeth into news, the American media is losing its bite. The reasons are obviously obvious. Given the manpower shortage, newspapers and televisions are now less prepared to uncover stories, dig deep into emerging ones or to question information that is available to them. A public opinion survey conducted by the Pew revealed that the readers are taking notice of this diminished commitment. Nearly 31% of the respondents claimed they had stopped using a particular news outlet because it no longer provided them the news and information they liked to read or hear.

Thus, the news media is caught in a vicious circle. Loss of revenue means loss of manpower, which means loss of quality, again meaning loss of readership. At the completion of each cycle, the revenue is reduced further. A growing number of media houses, including *Forbes* magazine, are turning to cheaper options. They're using technology to produce contents so that they can undercut the cost of human reporting.

One only needs to follow the money to understand why. While the news industry continues to lose out on advertising revenue in the United States, mobile and digital advertising are raking in money by the bushel. Mobile advertising grew 80% in 2012 to \$2.6 billion, while digital advertising grew 22%. According to Pew's estimate, newspaper revenues from print advertising in the United States declined from \$44.9 billion in 2003 to \$18.9 billion in 2012.

In their struggle to survive, 450 out of 1,380 US dailies are resorting to some kind of paid content subscription or pay wall plan. Many have opted for the metered model, which means it allows a certain number of free visits before requiring users to pay. The digital ad revenue of the newspapers is growing at a humble rate of 3% a year, while digital subscriptions are not enough to compensate for the loss of revenue in advertising. *The New York Times*, which is rumoured to be the next newspaper likely to be sold, has reported that its circulation revenue now exceeds its advertising revenue. The traditional revenue split is supposed to



be as much as 80% advertising dollars to 20% circulation dollars.

The outcome of this trend is that while the number of journalists is on the wane, the number of publicists is growing in the United States. The Pew study found that campaign reporters were acting primarily as "mega-phones, rather than as investigators," merely relaying the campaign statements instead of interpreting them and giving them contexts. Many journalists are being tempted by corporate marketers to write stories pitched by them.

On a fundamental level, news business is undergoing change. Once a social commitment for the businesses, it's now a business commitment for the socialites. That's affecting the nature of news as well. Journalism is losing its nose for news, its focus shifting from investigation to investors. The future of news looks fuzzy as the bottom line squeezes the baseline. The breaking news is that the spirit of journalism is breaking, if not broken already.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Rule of law or of outlaws?

In the newspapers and the TV channels we always see the honourable premier and her colleagues saying that no criminals will go unpunished and justice for all has been ensured during this government's tenure. They talk about rule of law but free their party men who are proven criminals, killers and terrorists. The latest move of the government to withdraw the politically motivated cases against its party men has stunned us. Is the incumbent government willing to establish rule of criminals instead of the rule of law? If this situation continues, the days are not far off when the country will be run by criminals.

Md. Sairul Islam
Lecturer in English
Jahangirnagar Girls' School and College
Mohadevpur, Naoagaon

Lawless motorcyclists

A detailed write-up on motorcyclists was published in a local English daily on 12th August. However, I wonder if any motorcyclist read it! I find that almost all motorcyclists violate most traffic rules at will. Their worst crime is riding motorcycles on footpaths, despite the High Court ruling that footpath is only meant for pedestrians. They are least bothered about rules and regulations and routinely violate traffic lights, or traffic policemen's hand signals for traffic control.

It will be a good and curative action, if the government deploys the army along with military police to force them to follow traffic rules. Over and above, they have the audacity to blow their horn at pedestrians on footpath, asking them to move aside so that they can drive their motorcycles at speed on footpaths! Why don't the authorities take stern action in containing this lawlessness? They really deserve hefty fines or alternatively, jail for the day.

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Education through MOOC

Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is a recent development in distance education with greater scope and wide implication. MOOC offers massive interactive participation and open access to courses via internet. It also provides forums of students and teachers to strengthen teaching-learning process. MOOC is still on experimental stage in advanced countries including the United States. Some universities have already adopted the MOOC system of education while others are examining its usefulness and reliability.

Recently Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates while presenting his key-note paper at the 'Microsoft Research's Faculty Summit' defined the present era as the 'golden era' of learning appreciating MOOC's enormous potential to expanding education and ensuring easy access to information. Meanwhile Mr. Gates cautioned that it's important not to forget the value of in-class learning, especially lab work and collaborative study groups.

So, MOOC can be an effective tool for expanding education.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture
SAU, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Peace is very necessary," published on August 27, 2013

Vikram Khan

Professor Yunus should be careful; the political scene in Bangladesh is a mine field...

Ezajur Rahman

Kahelda and Hasina should be careful too!

Doronto

CG system's strength outweighs its weakness. Apart from bona fide party supporters, majority supports CG. To support CG system does not mean to support opposition; it may mean supporting public interest. What Dr Yunus has said is what most of the people of the county have been saying.

Zman7

With his current political stand and talk, he has already started making different kind of mistakes. He said that if the election is held under an impartial caretaker government, it will ease the crisis and bring peace in the country. But how?

deepjelejai

They can kill millions for their own benefit. Besides, they were rude and vengeful to you. You came to put an end to the ugly quarrel among them. Kindness of you will probably melt the ice and we hope so.

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"Cause lost" (August 27, 2013)

Abul Kashem

Ongoing circumstances remind us painfully of the proclamation of "Charter for Change" made to public in 2008. How long will we need to wait for our cherished change?

Md. Shahjahan

It is necessary to investigate all allegations and bring all corrupts to book.

Dev Saha

I do not wish any bad thing happening to anybody but the nature will have the last laugh. Some innocent people will die sooner or later because of such awful destruction of natural water flow.

Shahin Huq

Our rulers love to spend their time on power struggle. They do not want to address such crucial issues.