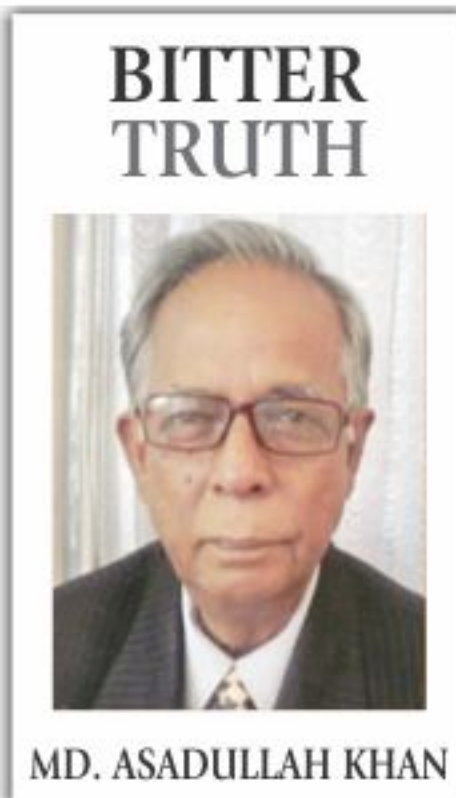


Lead-poisoning hampers intellectual growth



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

Following the recall of the turmeric powder from American chain stores, BSTI conducted tests on the powder and detected 40 to 58 parts per million (ppm) of lead, which far exceeds the permissible limit of 2.5 ppm set by it. BSTI has temporarily suspended Pran's turmeric powder processing and marketing licence.

The lead threat to the population, especially to children, is far worse than was thought earlier. Many developed nation had banned leaded paint and water pipes as far back as 1920s, and started to phase out leaded gasoline in the 1970s. Many lead pipes have been replaced either with copper or non-toxic materials.

Studies conducted over the last 20 years suggest that ingesting the lead equivalent of three granules of sugar a day can impair development and may make children less intelligent. Even the dust created by a lead-painted window can be toxic to children. This makes lead a health risk from the crumbling city apartments to suburban houses which were once thought to be relatively safe from lead contamination.

Reports reveal that 30 years ago authorities believed that children were safe with up to 40 micrograms of lead in each deciliter of blood. The safe level has slowly fallen since the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC) issued new warnings alerting doctors that anything higher than 10 mg/dL can be harmful to children. The CDC recommendation urges all children to be tested for lead as part of their regular health checkups.

In our country, the main sources of lead include leaded gasoline, lead smelting, coal combustion, lead-based paint, and pipes of lead-based solder in water supply system.

Vehicular lead emissions also accumulate in the soil and enter the food chain. Much to citizens' concern, health officials have not been trained to recognise the symptoms of lead poisoning, particularly in children, which are as banal as stomach aches, constipation and vomiting.

Scientific evidence shows that lead retards mental and

physical development of children causing reading and learning disabilities, hearing loss, respiratory problems, hyperactivity and lack of concentration, even at low levels of exposure. The upper respiratory tract of humans cannot stop passage of the fine particles and thus they are deposited in the lungs and eventually enter the blood stream. Children represent the highest risk group due to their propensity to ingest significant quantities of contaminated dust and soil. Adults are more susceptible to lead exposure through inhalation.

Recent studies have linked even low blood-lead levels to a host of problems associated with the brain and nervous systems including IQ loss, aggressiveness, hyperactivity, reduced attentiveness, hearing loss, slow reflex, slow growth and problems with balance.

We do not know how many children in our country are suffering from lead poisoning because even the big cities lack the facilities for testing blood-lead levels in children. We have woken up to the danger arising from lead only very recently. The administration has to be careful about the dangers that lead poses. And it has to make all-out efforts to control the threat from lead, the most abundant heavy metal from earth's crust.

In our country, the government has never taken the threat to seriously, evidenced by the fact that it has never urged the general public to have their children tested for blood lead. The problem is most severe where lead pipes have been laid in zones with "soft" or highly acidic water, which can accelerate the leaching of lead particles. Neither the government nor the general public should be harbouring any impression that lead poisoning has disappeared, because no one talked about it. And because no one suspected it, no one looked for it and so no one found it. Experts say that the moment a child complains of stomach pains and headaches, becomes hyperactive without any ostensible reason, and is inattentive in school, he should be tested for blood-lead level.

It may be a very extensive and expensive measure to clean up old residues of lead. A cheaper approach is prevention through substituting zinc for lead in plastic pipes and cables. Sweden is following that path. The result is that Swedish children show few cases of lead poisoning. In our country, we don't simply have the money to retool for large scale production of unleaded gasoline. Even then we might adopt some measures that are hardly costly.

Physicians have recommended some home-spun measures to keep kids and adults away from lead exposure. Parents should roll up car windows while travelling with children. Let tap water run for a while before using it -- so that any accumulated lead can wash out. These measures can help reduce exposure substantially. But one can never escape lead absorption or exposure through these measures, so state-level measures are obviously needed.

The writer is a columnist of *The Daily Star*. E-mail: aukhandk@gmail.com

Agricultural development: A macro perspective

MIRZA AZIZUL ISLAM

PRACTICALLY all countries of the world attach great importance to the development of agriculture. The most eloquent expression of this importance is to be found in the huge amount of subsidies. The developed countries pump in hundreds of billions of dollars as subsidies to sustain the growth of agricultural output. They also spend a significant amount of budgetary resources for the same purpose. This is done partly for egalitarian reasons, partly because of sentimental attachment to agriculture as a way of life.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the growth of output in the agricultural sector is considerably lower than in manufacturing and service sectors. Relevant data are presented below.

Average annual growth rate, 2000-2010 (percentage)			
	Agriculture	Manufacturing	Services
High income countries	0.7	1.9	2.1
Middle income countries	3.5	6.2	6.6
Low income countries	3.7	6.6	6.1
Bangladesh	3.5	7.8	6.1

Source: The World Bank, World Development Report, 2012

In consequence, the share of agriculture in GDP has been falling all over the world. There are some inherent reasons which explain the declining importance of agriculture. These are briefly noted below:

- The growth of population has slowed down globally. This, in combination with low income elasticity of demand for food and most other agricultural products beyond a certain threshold level of income, constrains the growth of demand and, therefore, output;
- Land is more or less a fixed factor of production. Agricultural output is therefore susceptible to quick diminishing returns;
- Productivity increase through technological change is usually slower in agricultural sector compared to manufacturing and modern services sectors;
- Adverse side effects of improved productivity-enhancing technologies are generally stronger in agriculture. For example, prolonged use of fertilizer may erode the natural fertility of land, irrigation may cause subsidence of subsoil water;
- Agricultural sector is highly vulnerable to adverse weather and climate changes such as drought, flood, cyclone etc.;
- Both exporting and importing countries frequently employ restrictive measures in the area of international trade in agriculture;

Despite the above limitations, policy makers cannot help paying considerable attention to sustained growth of agriculture due to several important considerations.

First, food is the first basic need for human existence.

Bangladesh's current crisis: A looming threat of extremism

PETER CUSTERS

BANGLADESH faces an unprecedented political crisis, one which can well be measured in historical terms. Numerous political commentators in Dhaka have given their 'balanced' advice aimed at ensuring that the upcoming elections be held in a neutral fashion.

But some seem to forget that the holding of 'free' and 'fair' elections in itself is no guarantee that Bangladesh's fragile democracy will survive once elections are over. Bangladesh's own history teaches otherwise. Didn't widespread violence against the country's minority Hindu community occur in the wake of the parliamentary elections of 2001? Weren't these despicable acts at the behest of the victors in the elections followed by a sponsored attempt to decapitate the country's opposition by killing Sheikh Hasina with bombs exploded at a central rally organised by the Awami League (August, 2004)? Have we forgotten that Bangladesh was shaken by country-wide, serial bomb blasts against the country's entire judicial system (2005) - blasts which unmistakably targeted the weakening of the country's democratic infrastructure? Isn't it high time we review the risks of a recurrence of those events, lest the upcoming elections become the springboard for launching an illiberal agenda?

Most discourses on the current crisis, to my knowledge, appear to skip the issue, yet it needs to be stated frankly and fearlessly. The Jamaat-e-Islami, BNP's close ally, is basically a dogmatic political force. This surely will be disputed by my detractors. After all, the Jamaat-e-Islami does not bank on national chauvinism -- as far right parties in Europe during the period between the two world wars did. But then the fascistic phenomenon as the policy formula to address capitalism's unending crisis emerged in historically specific circumstances.

The Jamaat-e-Islami is a reactionary political force predisposed to violence on at least the following counts. It turns religious minorities -- Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslim Ahmadiyas -- into scapegoats so as to divert the attention of the common people away from the sources of their poverty. Secondly, the Jamaat systematically employs the weapon of intimidation so as to scare civilians. Such as when its cadres derail trains, set fire to buses, and mutilate cops killed during self-declared hartals. Thirdly, it is able to muster significant mass support from neglected sections of the populace, be it mainly indirectly. In spite of the party's proven unpopularity among large sections of the public, it is in a position to direct and strike.

Further, the Jamaat's capacity to influence Bangladeshi politics has grown, not diminished, since the period when the BNP-Jamaat coalition was in power (2001-2006). While the International Crimes Tribunal, by indicting top-leaders of the Jamaat for war crimes committed during Bangladesh's Liberation War, temporarily put the party on the defensive, it managed to resume its offensive in the wake of the Shahbagh uprising of February last.

With the overwhelmingly large and unchecked financial resources it commands the Jamaat has been able to muster a power bloc that appears well consolidated. On the one hand, it has succeeded in communalising BNP's politics; on the other hand it has fielded a frontal organisation, the Hefajat-e-Islam, which in April and May last was able to mobilise a huge

number of Qawmi madrasa students and teachers for its Dhaka rally and Dhaka siege programmes.

In fielding the Hefajat-e-Islam, an organisation virtually unknown until March of this year, the Jamaat removed two obstacles in one go. It responded to the threat of a state ban on its politics, which issue had come to the fore through Shahbagh. And it circumvented the problem of the party's own insurmountable lack of mass popularity. No matter the archaic character of the Hefajat-e-Islam's demands, the fielding of this force has put the Jamaat in a strategic position to capture state power as the brains and treasurer of the power bloc it has forged.

What should Hasina's government do under the given circumstances? It is true the government's own record is far from convincing. It, for instance, failed tragically to provide security to female and male labourers in the readymade garments sector. The country had to wait for a worldwide outcry over the Rana Plaza disaster (April last) to occur before the government finally agreed to undertake measures to improve factory safety and strengthen the labour inspection regime. Given the chain of accidents that has marred the sector's history -- both fire incidents and building collapses -- the enhancement of workers' safety should have been a top priority from the very start of the Mahajote's rule.

Moreover lack of concern for people's security is not limited to the garments sector alone. One notably fails to comprehend how the government, within less than two years after Fukushima's nuclear catastrophe, could sign a treaty with Russia for construction of a nuclear power plant at Rooppur in Pabna, close to the river Ganges. To all accounts, the Japanese authorities have not managed to prevent leakage of radioactively contaminated water from the 1,000 storage tanks (!) with cooling water at Fukushima. Fears are growing that the food chain in the world's oceans will be affected permanently. Why not review the Rooppur project in the light of Japan's experience? Why should any government want to put the safety of its future generations at risk?

These criticisms are not meant to undermine the government's efforts to sustain Bangladesh's democratic processes. In fact, I believe that Hasina's cabinet should face the country's current crisis head-on, by not giving in to BNP's demand for a non-party interim government, for the time being at least. Although BNP's incessant and violent hartals do hurt the interests of both the working population and the business community, it would be very wrong for the government to give in to the opposition's politics of intimidation and terror. In fact, from a long-term point of view there is a need to go slow on preparations for the next polls.

Meanwhile there are plenty of steps towards strengthening democracy that Hasina's government can take. It can work to remove all obstacles for the functioning of independent trade unions in the readymade garments sector. It can encourage Sufi fraternities opposed to the Jamaat to spread their message of tolerance and cultural reform in the country's remotest areas. And though it would be wrong to patronise or co-opt, the government can facilitate emergence of a new electoral bloc of left and democratic forces accommodating Shahbagh activists and the new generation of professional intellectuals.

The writer is Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi.

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CROSSWORD
By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Bit of
- 2 Obsessed with
- 3 Walked unsteadily to
- 4 Glutton
- 5 Flag
- 6 Features
- 7 Doer's mate
- 8 Poker payment
- 9 Early auto
- 10 One or more
- 11 Revolving
- 12 Select on the radio dial
- 13 Doer's mate
- 14 Cleopatra's love
- 15 Glutton
- 16 Goody cheese
- 17 Revolving
- 18 Lush
- 19 Exorbitant
- 20 Instructive kind of book
- 21 Walked pompously
- 22 Give a host
- 23 Take to the sky
- 24 Minimal change
- 25 Colors anew
- 26 Border

DOWN

- 1 Launder
- 2 Obsessed with
- 3 Walked unsteadily to
- 4 Glutton
- 5 Flag
- 6 Features
- 7 Doer's mate
- 8 Poker payment
- 9 Early auto
- 10 One or more
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- 23 Take to the sky
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- 26 Border

Yesterday's answer

- 21 Dorothy's dog
- 22 Battle souvenir
- 23 Fare
- 24 Lively folk
- 25 Yemen neighbor
- 26 Greeting
- 27 Director
- 28 Premier
- 33 Nebula makeup
- 34 Scuffle
- 35 Fight
- 37 Assess
- 38 Fighting
- 39 Hall, to Caesar
- 40 Pot part
- 41 Great serve

QUOTABLE Quote

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

Soren Kierkegaard

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