

Corruption-ridden public health sector

Rural, poor patients getting a raw deal

PLAGUED with pervasive corruption, the government-run health sector is failing to deliver as it should resulting in the general loss of public trust in its service. As a result, the poor patients, especially, of the rural areas, are at the receiving end, while the better-off people are either turning to private hospitals or going abroad for treatment. This is indeed a sad commentary on the country's public health service which is otherwise credited for its achievements in reducing child and maternal mortality rate as well as increasing life expectancy significantly.

As revealed by a recent report of the Bangladesh Chapter of the international graft watchdog, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), corruption is so rampant among the officials of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) that no recruitment, promotion, or transfer is possible there without bribe. And those buying their positions at the public hospitals through such corrupt means will, naturally, force patients to pay for the services they are supposed to get free of charge. Small wonder giving bribe is the easiest way to access hospital services including consultation, hospital admission, getting beds, medicines, diagnostic services and so on. Add to it the phenomenon of absenteeism among doctors at the upazila or union level health clinics that often compels poor patients to visit doctors at their private chambers, or even worse, to go to private clinics for treatment at prohibitive costs.

Such disquieting picture of public hospitals flies in the face of the government's claim to the contrary. The health ministry would do well to consider the TIB report seriously and take a long, hard look at the goings-on in the public health sector.

Poor utilisation of aid money

Need to remove red-tape in project implementation

DELAYS in project implementation have resulted in the swelling up of unutilized foreign development assistance in the pipeline. Thanks to the present rate of annual utilization at a mere 18 per cent that a colossal sum of aid money amounting US\$19.30 billion is lying idle. This is indeed unfortunate for an economy, 35 per cent of whose allocations for Annual Development Programme (ADP), especially for infrastructure development, still comes from external assistance.

The factors coming in the way of timely implementation of development projects, as identified by the Economic Relations Division (ERD), include, inter alia, procrastination in the preparation as well as approval of the project proposals and delay in issuing work orders following a prolonged process of tenders to purchase materials and so on. Delays are also made at the development partners' end in disbursing project funds. Interestingly, these factors are too familiar and persistent to be discovered anew. They are purely bureaucratic in origin and until and unless the political leadership at the helm is not exerting its will to break the vicious circle and infuse dynamism in the process of project implementation by way of strong oversight from the inception till completion, things will hardly improve.

The argument of gradually reducing our dependency on foreign assistance is unassailable. Even so, it cannot be an excuse for lack of performance so far as implementation of foreign-aided development projects is concerned. The government must simplify procedures and free the project implementation process of bureaucratic red-tape to ensure timely and full utilization of foreign development assistance.

No, we can't!

EDITORIAL: THE STATESMAN (INDIA)

OVER the next two years, the United States of America will be on test. For it will have to contend with the dichotomy of a Democratic executive and a predominantly Republican legislature. President Barack Obama has suffered a massive defeat in Tuesday's mid-term elections with the Republicans attaining a majority in the Senate and securing total control over Congress. It is a famous victory by any reckoning and one that signifies the country's tilt from mildly left-of-centre over the past six years to the Right even before the occupant of the White House gears up for the wrap-up motions of his eight-year presidency. It might sound uncharitable but nonetheless is true—Mr Obama has been reduced to a dead-duck rather than a lame-duck president. The shellacking has been severe though not wholly unexpected. Historians will record the mid-term come-down as tragic; the emotive chant of "Yes, we can!" shall resonate no more and is likely to be relegated to the footnotes. It is the way of history. It is much too palpable that the American—not always "quiet"—has not been overly impressed by his perceived achievements; even the critical legislation of public health insurance has not been able to retain the Democratic vote. He may even have spoken against the dithering in foreign policy—from the lack of response in the Arab region to the robust intervention in Iraq to counter the Islamic State ... eleven years after George Bush sent his forces in search of the WMD that wasn't. In neither operation was the domestic constituency taken into confidence. The difference between "boots on the ground" and aerial bombardment doesn't quite spell the difference in popular perception. America's response to international turbulence has been remarkably indecisive over the past few years. Not that foreign policy determines the result; but there is little doubt that this time it played a role. Mr. Obama has lacked a coherent strategy on a raft of issues, pre-eminently Ukraine, where he has been outmanoeuvred by Vladimir Putin; the emergence of ISIS; the prevarication over Syria; beheadings of American captives; and the impact of Ebola in America, however limited in comparison to its endemic character in west Africa. In foreign policy, he has conveyed the impression of a confused America.

In a sense, the mid-term election has been a referendum and it would be no exaggeration to submit that Mr. Obama has suffered almost a personal repudiation. The psephological swing carries an unnerving message—the Republican party has strengthened its fort from Colorado to North Carolina, Iowa and Arkansas, indeed states that were considered to be Democratic bastions. In domestic policy, such achievements as the health bill and turning the tide after the 2008 meltdown have not yielded dividend at the hustings. It isn't the investment banker who determines the agenda; what matters is the thinning wallet of the average American. The quirk of history has shifted the focus to 2016.

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For durable democracy

STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

THE ground reality is that the major opposition political party is not willing to recognise the legitimacy of the present government formed with the support and actual strength of another major political party. Apparently, there is an outward calm but undoubtedly there is tension underneath. Such a scenario will surely not strengthen the foundation of our democratic existence. The national political scene has alternated between elected dispensation and spells of autocratic rule. It is, therefore, desirable and necessary that we as a nation learn from our deficiencies and debacles and consolidate our democratic credentials.

The irony is that it took a less than elected ruling dispensation to tell us that the class divide in our society was complete. It is, thus, becoming clear that on one side were those who were in a position to exploit the resources of the country to their heart's desire, and on the other were the teeming millions who were powerless, and were left to fend for themselves.

A lesson learnt is that we as a nation have been sitting on a dangerous fault-line: a disconnect between government and the society. There was a wide and growing gulf between the rulers and the people. Government, with all its power, mandate and huge resources, had very little clue about the ground situation: how people think, how they live, how they perceive things, what their needs are, what their priorities are. People, on the other hand, started losing faith in the successive governments.

Another lesson learnt is that the coercive arm of the state has been used and misused by the ruling coterie. Thus, the near breakdown of civic services and ineffective maintenance of law and order were a painful reality. It appeared that protecting the status quo from all challenges was the prime activity of the state, and the deplorable scenario was one of state machinery being put to unashamed use for keeping rival political claimants to power in check. All these happened while violence in various forms and shades took firm root and continued to

traumatise the people.

A crucial lesson learnt is perhaps the supreme necessity of building institutions because it is foolish to expect to be free while remaining ignorant. We forget that when a republic is born, it is the leaders who produce the institutions, and later such institutions produce leaders. We need nation-building institutions that will produce the leaders of tomorrow. One would fondly expect that institutions of excellence will create leaders who would not be poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice.

A point to remember would be the realisation that the staying power of our democracy depends upon the strength of our political institutions and the severity of economic crisis. However, we will not collapse due to economic failure if our political institutions acquire durability through experience and tradition. Economic stagnancy coupled with fragile institutions and a pliant constitution is the danger.

We have to do away with the pernicious divisiveness and polarisation on political lines, and stop displaying the tribal temper in political discussions. This temper is pressing a partisan advantage to its bitter end, thus failing to understand and respect the other side. The appreciation of unity between all citizens is lost.

It appears that our oligarchic system has proved to be effective only for a limited period and can achieve limited objectives because it suffers from two inherent weaknesses, lack of legitimacy and the unfortunate disconnection between the ruling class and the civil society.

The sad reality is that our establishment sustained itself mostly through brute force, fear, coercion and corruption. Despite having democratic identity our system has sought support of discredited politicians and in some cases people having criminal record. To go about political business, that is conducting affairs of state, with such people rules have been bent and relaxed that in effect led to a culture of loot and plunder.

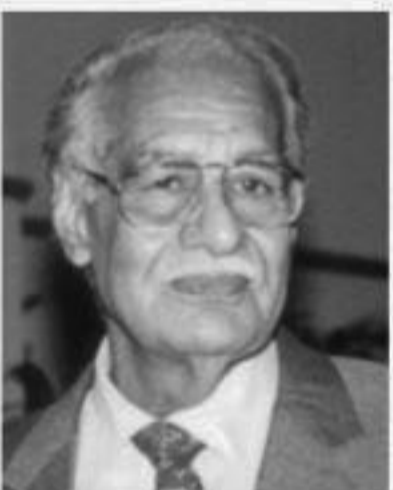
The State's writ has to be effective in a redefined role where protecting status quo from all challenges shall not be its prime activity. The government machinery should not be used to keep the rival claimants to power in check. Our ruling class has to rise above narrow self or institutional interests. Pressure must be exerted on the rulers to make them accountable on a continuing basis.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

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Two icons of independence movement

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has refurbished the past and brought Patel's name to the fore by celebrating his birthday as Rashtriya Ekta day. It, however, goes to the credit of Modi that unlike his party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), he has not devalued the role which Nehru played in freeing and building of the country. The BJP has not mentioned in its manifesto Nehru among the freedom fighters and builders of the nation.

There are people who believe that India's interests would have been served better if Sardar Patel, in place of Jawaharlal Nehru, had been the country's prime minister. This hypothetical possibility had been voiced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he was Gujarat chief minister.

Of all the leaders, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Nehru's guide and philosopher, came to the same conclusion after watching Nehru as an administrator. Azad was in Nehru's cabinet and saw him from close quarters. Azad told his secretary, Humayun Kabir, that they should have made Nehru the country's president and Patel its prime minister.

By no stretch of imagination, can Azad be linked with Patel or his philosophy. During the national struggle, both ardent participants, were poles apart and made no secret of their stance. Patel was a pro-Hindu but strictly adhered to pluralism. Azad was secular through and through and boldly faced the charge of "Hindu show boy" that the Muslim League made against him. He did not flinch even for a second to say publicly that the formation of Pakistan would be harmful to the interest of Muslims.

He would say before partition that the Muslims could walk proudly in the country with their heads held high that they were equal partners, even though they were fewer in numbers. Once India was divided on the basis of religion, the Hindus would tell the Muslims that you had taken their share and should, therefore, go to Pakistan.

Even after 67 years of division, this approach has not been disowned either in India or Pakistan. The latter, Pakistan has ousted practically all Hindus. However, the Muslims in India continue to be a target of fanatics. When there is a tension between the two countries, many Hindus refer to Muslims as Pakistanis. Little purpose will be served in pursuing this point because the wounds of partition are far from healed and the people in both the

communities continue to be exploited in the name of religion.

Left to Patel, he would have had an exchange of population before accepting partition. Nehru was different. He did not mix religion with politics or the state. The distance in separation in their approach made Mahatma Gandhi, who led the war of independence, to nominate Nehru as his successor. The Hindu-Muslim unity was a matter of faith with Gandhiji, not part of the policy.

Gandhiji and Patel came from the same state, Gujarat, ate the same food and represented the traditions of the state in many ways. Yet Gandhiji preferred Nehru to Patel. Gandhiji knew that Nehru even dreamt in English and that he was too much engrossed in world affairs. But Gandhiji also knew that Nehru would interpret his philosophy of Hindu-Muslim unity more faithfully and employ such methods to implement it that respected scruples and were non-violent and fair.

The typical example is that of Travancore. It announced its independence and initiated the process of seceding. VP had a man in khaki when he went to the Travancore maharaja. He signed the instrument of accession. He explained subsequently that he did not want his family to suffer and spend years in jail.

Gandhiji was also confident that his secular ideals would be safer in the hands of Nehru. This was proved when Patel refused to release Rs. 64 crore to Pakistan. This sum was part of assets which India had agreed to transfer while agreeing to the partition details. Patel argued that how could he release the money when India and Pakistan was engaged in a war over Kashmir. Gandhiji had to go on fast unto death to make Patel relent.

The extremist Hindus had vitiated the atmosphere of amity over the sum of Rs. 64 crore. The society was sought to be polarised. They criticised Gandhiji again and again for being anti-national and anti-Hindu. The RSS, the fallout of Hindu Mahasabha's philosophy of Hindutva, hatched a conspiracy and shot Gandhiji dead.

Patel was quite right in banning the RSS and blaming it for disturbing the atmosphere of secularism. Once again the slant of Patel towards the RSS made him withdraw the ban once the organisation changed its character to become a cultural organisation. This was only a smokescreen behind which the RSS used the BJP for its political activities. Modi is its candidate. In fact, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat has openly said that the outfit would be participating in politics. Nehru had exposed the duplicity of the RSS.

When Azad thought Nehru's suitability for the office of president, he was confident that the communal forces had been crushed. He commended Patel's quality of being pragmatic and practical. Azad had come to have full faith in Patel's secular aptitude. That Modi is using Patel's image for polarising the society is unfortunate. Practical as Patel was, he would have understood that India's destiny lay in a democratic, secular polity. He, as prime minister, would have deepened its foundation more firmly than Nehru.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Mrityunjoy's killer must face justice

The killing of Mrityunjoy Acharjee due to reckless driving of a top police officer's son has raised several questions. Why would an innocent have to die because of a person's reckless driving? Jafar Sadik, the guilty, failed to produce any driving license and yet was bailed. The family of the



PHOTO: COLLECTED FROM FACEBOOK

deceased now fears that they might not get justice.

The perpetrator must be punished, regardless of how influential he is. Justice must be done and there should be no cover-up of the crime. Also the family members of the victim must receive adequate financial compensation from the offender.

Sabrina Samreen
North South University, Dhaka

All big talk and no action

This is in reference to your business report of October 30 by Zahid Hussain and Johannes Zutt. The table which shows the comparison of infrastructure quality of the financial year 2014-2015 is very disappointing. Our overall ranking is 109 among 144 countries that have been ranked! Only Pakistan and Myanmar are ranked below us among the sub-continental countries. This is the net result of our 'all big talk and no action' that defines our overall progress. Luckily for us, there was no subject-wise ranking on bribery and corruption, an item in which for a score between one and ten, we would easily have scored eight!

S. A. Mansoor
Dhaka

Road from College Gate to SAU needs urgent repair

The road connecting Mirpur road (College Gate) to Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, Agricultural Training Institute and Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital is in a very bad condition and unfit for the movement of vehicular traffic and pedestrians. This condition has been prevailing for the last several months. Would the authorities concerned take immediate measures to repair this important road?

Professor M Zahidul Haque
Department of Agricultural Extension & Information System, SAU, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Disaster averted," published on November 2, 2014

Nasirullah Mridha, USA
A country under blackout for 8-12 hours in this modern age can only be imagined in fairytales.

Rajeev Sinha
The Prime Minister earlier boasted that she had solved Bangladesh's power crisis and suggested using power cuts to remind Bangladeshis of the bad old days under BNP. Even in the worst days under Khaleda Zia, there was never a nationwide power outage that disabled industry, government and domestic life. This is a catastrophe on a scale not seen in Bangladesh for decades, and it happened under Sheikh Hasina's leadership. What new misery should we expect?

Redgreen
It's an eye-opener for Bangladesh. One lesson is to be learned that if Bangladesh becomes dependent on India for such important and critical utility service, then in case of emergency Bangladesh will be very vulnerable.

"It was too big for control system" (Nov. 3, 2014)

Sayed Rahman
We need to improve our power stations with sophisticated equipment as well as experienced personnel to cope with such situations.

Banglabill
The cause of the outage was a component failure but the length of the outage was the proof of system failure.

"DEATH for Jamaat's 'moneymen'" (Nov. 3, 2014)

Shah Deeldar
The impunity for the last four decades has made many butchers careless. Hopefully, the jinx is finally being removed.