

THOUGHTS AND INITIATIVES

1. BDI CONFERENCE ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh Student Association (**BSA**)¹ of the University of Pittsburgh and **Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI)** are jointly organizing a one-day Conference on the socio-economic development of Bangladesh to be held on Saturday August 12, 1995 on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The format of the conference is as follows:

8:00am - 8:45am

Registration,
Continental Breakfast

8:45am - 9:00am

Inauguration & Welcome
Address

9:00am - 12:00noon

Economics - Paper I
Political Science - Paper I
Sociology - Paper I
Economics - Paper I

12:00noon - 1:30pm

Lunch break

1:30pm - 4:30pm

Public Administration - Paper I
Political Science - Paper II
Economics - Paper III
Engineering - Paper I

4:30pm - 4:45pm

Closing Remarks

Eminent North American scholars of Bangladeshi origin, viz., Professors Nurul Islam, Zillur Rahman Khan, Salim Rashid, Azizur Rahman Khan, among others are expected to participate in the Conference. The registration fee for the Conference is \$50. However, the fee will be reduced by \$10 if registered by June 30, 1995. The registration fee will cover refreshments in the morning and afternoon, lunch and the proceedings of the Conference (in hard cover).

CONFERENCE THEMES

1. Economics

According to recent reports², Bangladesh possesses a vast reserved capacity, especially in the vitally important sector of the capital goods industry³. Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory (BMTF), for example, *is one of the largest of its kind in the world*. Ironically, however, it has *produced at only 2-4% of its capacity*. To cite another example, *complete sugar plants can be designed, fabricated and installed by utilizing existing capacity in Bangladesh*. However, *none has so far been built*. A vast production potential is also known to exist in other industries of the capital goods sector, such as, cotton textile machinery, jute textile machinery, leather machinery, plastics machinery, electrical machinery and equipment, diesel engine manufacturing and structural engineering.

The major constraint for the capital goods sector is the suppressed local demand for these goods. This constraint is instituted principally through an anomalous tax structure, in which import duties as low as 2.5% is imposed on the finished industrial and agricultural machineries. On the other hand, import duties as high as 50-150% is imposed on raw materials and parts that are required to manufacture these machineries locally. This tax policy is adversely affecting the growth of the local machinery and equipment manufacturing sector⁴ by raising the unit cost of production, particularly, since the import content in the final output is large. *Because of such tax anomalies, the price of an imported complete machinery/equipment is at times much cheaper than that of a locally assembled alternative*.

Why Bangladesh government would establish such a tax structure? How can this crucial problem be solved? The conference is expected to address this and other similar crucial economic issues facing Bangladesh today, such as: economic lessons learnt from the past; its problems and prospects; obstacles in privatizing large economic sectors (viz., telephone, railways, television, radio, airlines, water supply and sewerage system and electricity); status of foreign investment and stock market.

2. Political Science

For the first time in history of Bangladesh, the Head of the State (President Hussain M. Ershad) has been removed from power without being assassinated. That was followed by a relatively fair election that was generally accepted by most opposition political parties. Can this remarkable achievement be identified as one-time phenomenon or the dawning of a new era? Is Bangladesh expected to stay on the same course toward a more stable political system? What other policy measures can be devised in order to ensure continued stability of the country? Will Bangladesh have regular, free and fair elections in coming years?

What should the function of the military and civilian bureaucracies be in the immediate future of Bangladesh? Bangladesh is geographically surrounded by India. How should Bangladesh position itself politically with respect to India? What should the position of Bangladesh be in post-cold war world politics? The political maneuver in Bangladesh involves a delicate balancing act between upholding the religious feelings of its people and pressing forward economic development through science and technological innovation. This balancing act is necessary because the latter is often mistakenly labelled as "western". What should the optimal strategy be in order to achieve socio-political and economic stability in the country? The paper(s) can also explore the evolution and development of democratic processes and institutions, such as, Parliament and news media.

3. Sociology

By and large, Bangladeshi nationals living abroad are highly dedicated and successful at their workplaces. In contrast, why the Bangladeshis with similar social upbringing fail to perform equally well at home in Bangladesh? It is generally argued that increases in per capita income lead to decline in population growth. Despite continual low per capita income of Bangladeshis, fertility

level went down by 38% over 1979-1991. How did this happen? It would also be interesting to learn about the social impact in Bangladesh (foreign remittances, conspicuous consumption, investment) of its citizens migrating abroad. Are CNN (Cable News Network of U.S.A.) and BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) TV broadcast having any impact in Bangladesh in terms of social awakening?

How does the sociological behavior of Bangladeshis factor into the economic development of the country? In the West, it is often argued that the people in the East do not value the lives of human beings as much as those in the West. This perception is obviously wrong. Can we reveal the real characteristics and the inner abilities of the people of Bangladesh in scientific terms so that an appropriate strategy may be devised for socio-economic development? How can we present a convincing argument to demonstrate that *scientific and technological advancement in a society does not destroy its socio-cultural setting*? The paper(s) may also address: social aspects of environmental problems, women in development, unemployment of educated people in Bangladesh (this might destroy social fabric by generating violence), religious and cultural atmosphere.

4. Public Administration

What are the problems of civilian and army bureaucracies in Bangladesh? What measures can be taken to resolve them? How is the government administrative structure inhibiting economic development? The issue is to reduce red-tape and paper work so as to make the bureaucracy more efficient. How can this be achieved? What are the problems and prospects of local Government? What did we learn from our recent experiences with local Government, especially the now defunct Upazilla system.

5. Science/Engineering

What are the current status of the various engineering fields, such as, computer training and applications, tele-communication, flood control, rural electrification, water supply and sewerage, or any other infrastructural system related to engineering? How can we solve the problems existing in these areas? What are the prospects of higher education in engineering? The main solution may lie in successfully broadening the industrial production of Bangladesh. What roles the engineers at home and abroad can play in this regard?

Notes:

1. BSA is a student organization registered with the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

2. "Machinery Manufacturing in Bangladesh: an industry study with particular reference to technological capability", M. Mozammel Huq, K. M. Nabiul Islam and Nazrul Islam, University Press Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1993.

Also, "Dholai Khal: What is needed is Government patronage", Shamsuzzaman Biswas, Shilpobazar: A paper of Industry and Commerce, January 29 to February 12, 1994.

3. BDI is primarily active in the capital goods manufacturing sector of Bangladesh.

4. For example, Bangladesh Government is reportedly closing down BMTF. See "Heavy industries can be saved by decentralization", M. Alamgir Ahmed, Daily Inquilab, January 5, 1994.