

Canal-Digging : Its Economic Implications

(Second Instalment)

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On more than one occasion, the people of Bangladesh have heard of high sounding economic programmes which were presented to them by every new government without any perceptible end result. Painfully cheated and deprived as the common people had been in all such cases, they did not have to wait too long to get disenchanted and begin to realise the hollowness and futility of all those much vaunted package programmes. Now for obvious reasons, the people like to make it a point to pause just a while before jumping into action under any programme. So what we have to do first of all is to carry out a deep study to discover what went wrong in the past cases and profitably utilise the lessons derived therefrom in our future course of action. But one thing is clear. The success of a colossal programme like canal digging under voluntary Mass Participation Scheme is heavily dependent on how effectively we could mobilise the people in general irrespective of political affiliation or any other creed. To ensure overall success of the programme, the following points should be given due consideration. First leaving aside the viewpoint of national interests, we have to let the people understand as to whose interest the programme is designed for. Is it the big land owner class that will be the direct beneficiary? If so, what shall be the incentive for the small and landless farmers to be involved in the programme? How will the share croppers' interests be augmented or affected? Obviously there comes up the accusation of inequitable or uneven land distribution system that prevails in Bangladesh with all its irrational and feudalistic traits. To break up the age-old system at a single stroke makes it a hard task that seems neither desirable nor practicable. In our present socio-political set-up, "Full dose may be non-acceptable at the moment but a mild dose is just what is warranted by the situation". In fact, what we hint at is socio-politically inexpedient step like drastic land reform but a well planned policy arrangement defining the interests of the small land owners and landless farmers including the share croppers while carefully avoiding to give

a big jolt to the landed aristocracy at the moment. Second, the programme is over-whelmingly based on voluntary labour. The 85% voluntary participation as envisaged by the programme though feasible at the initial stage is not likely to continue for long. Because of mass poverty and other reasons, this percentage would cease to work should the authority fail to bring a much bigger percentage than the present 15% of the mass participation under "Food For Work" programme. Again the course of canal should be planned with due regard for the interests of the medium and small land owners. The prospect of benefit should be as far as possible equitably held out to all farmers big or small so as to ensure the continuing flow of voluntary labour. THIRD Super-vision and stock-taking are no less important for execution of any project. As has been evidenced by our experience in the past the rural leaders and organisers in the field become tremendously active to stage a mass mobilisation on the occasion of any Minister's or high government official's visit. It seems the entire scene is enacted for a grand show in honour of the visiting dignitary because the enthusiastic fervour on the part of the local organisers and for that matter on the part of the common participants at work fade out immediately after the visit. So consideration should also be given to the point of frequent visit by Ministers/high officials for on-the-spot supervision and stock-taking of the progress of work at different places.

Fourth the low water bearing capacity of the rivers which have become shallow due to siltation over the years, is as much responsible for flood as the absence of adequate canal network for proper drainage is. So the effectiveness of the canals now being excavated and re-excavated shall be greatly minimised so far as one of the main purposes behind the programme, to ease or relieve the flood situation is concerned if it is not accompanied with the dredging of the silted rivers. Therefore dredging of the rivers should also be undertaken so as to augment the water absorbing capacity of the rivers.

Fifth, the success of the pro-

gramme to a great extent depends on how far we could attract active support and cooperation of the opposition parties. The best way to overcome the opposition is by convincing the people through concerted action. If the people are given to understand that the programme is entirely meant to promote their common welfare, the opposition attempts to undercut the government efforts shall automatically fail. Again policy of persuasion rather than force may prove somewhat effective in drawing active support of the opposition.

Sixth, last but not the least is that the programme should be widely publicised through mass media coverage so that the conscience of the whole nation is roused to the same cause. If possible cinematic display should be arranged in the rural areas so as to inspire the people to engage wholeheartedly in the programme. Such display should concentrate on how the dry regions like the Punjab and other areas of the subcontinent have been transformed into green farmland. They should be given to see how astonishingly the hard geographic realities have been reversed for the welfare of the people. The basic philosophy of the programme should also be interpreted in true perspective in various World forums for moral and material support that can help us a lot.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the absence of any organised efforts, our vast manpower resources have so long remained neglected and uncared for. We have ended up uselessly blaming the so-called resource constraint and unbridled population growth to be accountable for our poverty. So there have remained vast tracts of land uncultivated so many natural resources unharnessed and the huge manpower resources unutilised. This time efforts have been afoot in right earnest to awaken the whole nation to the need for collective venture to achieve uplift of our rural economy.

What the people of China did with the river Huang-ho and how the Japanese shot out as an economic giant within an unbelievably short span of time should be our guiding inspiration. A pair of strong

hands as we have been gifted with are the most powerful weapon at our disposal. This weapon, if accompanied with the spirit of work can do wonders these are what we are equipped with today.

In our course of action the reactionary machination, if any should be overcome through tactical campaigning and persuasive drive, but not through use of force or intimidation. Conscious efforts should also co-exist with that to sink the alleged bureaucratic attitude of maintaining a wide difference or isolation from the common people. Continuing mass participation, nay, the very success of the programme is pre-conditioned by the spectacular and tangible evidence being set to the effect that the keynote of the programme is absolute commitment to the welfare and uplift of the society as a whole not of any particular section or interest group. We have to set that evidence.

Happily enough under the dynamic leadership of President Ziaur Rahman the entire administrative machinery has been geared up to the one and one single cause of mass mobilisation with an invincible spirit to lay the foundation of a self-reliant rural economy by bringing the country under an irrigation network.

As for the result, by no account one should be too much skeptic with a pessimistic mood.

Whatever mass enthusiasm and work spirit has been engendered with the launching of the canal excavation and re-excavation programme that merits to be consolidated and channelised for productive purposes. However conservatively we seek to evaluate it the result is bound to be encouraging because the performance of thousands of 'Spades' and numberless hands using them has already been proved in Ulschi and other areas. What is needed now is more concerted action more organisation more motivation and crowning all, more mass mobilisation.

With everything going a right success is ours. Today's dream of food surplus however ludicrous it might appear to the critics, will be tomorrow's reality. Looking forward towards that happy day let us wait and see but not with the hands kept stupidly idle.