

## Push-in putting strain on bilateral relations

*Come to grips with the issue through discussion*

HOW does the Indo-Bangla borderscape look like today? Guns are pointed at each other; hundreds of Bengali-speaking people have been collected to be pushed by the BSF into Bangladesh; the BDR along with local people are resisting it; and the victims, including women and children, are living it out under the open skies in winter at the no man's land. Hardly a picture of normality. In fact it is potentially explosive.

All this for no better reason than an ingeniously contrived pressure being exerted on Bangladesh in the shape of push-in attempts. What could be dealt with as a routine inter-country affair, has been blown out of proportion -- thanks to India. New Delhi is doing it for reasons best known to her, although there is no dearth of pointers to the peculiar mindset of the BJP-led government. Some look at it as an extension of the Gujarat card being played out with some state and other elections in mind. Whatever maybe the case, the broader perspective of Indo-Bangla relations has been subsumed -- one would like to think temporarily -- by the capricious micro-dynamic of India's attempted deportation charade.

Since January 22<sup>nd</sup> there have been a few dozen attempts made by the BSF to push Bengali-speaking Muslim Indians reportedly collected from Maharashtra, Mumbai, New Delhi and West Bengal through several border points into Bangladesh territory. It is alleged that they were being coerced into admitting they were illegal Bangladesh immigrants. The surreptitious BSF moves met with resistance from the BDR and local people raising the temperature along the borders.

The BDR has beefed up its positions, while, according to the latest reports, Indian commandos have been stationed at the border. The overall situation in the border districts has become needlessly tense. There has been even exchange of fire between the BSF and the BDR at Samanta border point in Jhenidah on January 27. A dawn-to-dusk curfew had been clamped on the Indian side of the border adjoining Jessore, Satkhira and Jhenidah.

Bengali-speaking Indian Muslims apparently living in slums 'having no ration cards' may have proved vulnerable to the collection drive. Now, the thing is, one could easily read a communal dimension to it because the victims appear to be mostly Muslim. So, the border is tensed up and a communal frenzy is being worked up which bodes neither well for Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations nor for the region as a whole.

The 'humanitarian ramifications of the evolving situation' cannot be trifled with. These people have been living in India for years and the BJP-led government is now ditching them all of a sudden to gain a political mileage. The sight of numerous people, including women and children, being stranded in no-man's land without food, shelter and clothes should evoke sympathy from all concerned.

It also engenders outrage against people who are making an issue of something that can be addressed through the normal channels of inter-state communication. The BDR has so far sent four protest letters to the BSF and repeatedly asked for flag meetings to talk things over. But nothing has come off these efforts. At the same time, the government of Bangladesh has formally urged New Delhi to stop the push-in bids one time too many. These have not been paid heed to as yet.

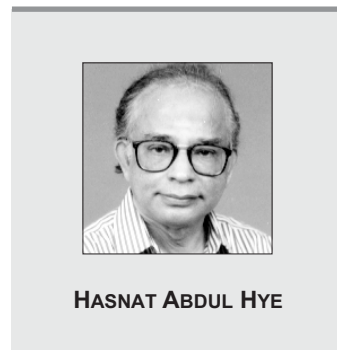
Instead, New Delhi has reacted to Bangladesh's overture by dubbing the push-in charges as 'baseless and absurd'. 'There is no question of Indian nationals being pushed into Bangladesh', the Indian authorities have asserted. Our position is that the mere fact of being Bengali-speaking does not entitle one to Bangladeshi citizenship. Would the Bangladesh authorities be wrong in rejecting entry to those being forced into our territory?

The issue is nothing new, though. It had cropped up before and, when it did so the last time over, we had drawn the Indian government's attention to the standard norm for giving a list of alleged illegal immigrants so that we could check out on their status at our end.

If India hyped it all to make Bangladesh feel 'how serious the illegal immigration issue is,' then we must say she has taken a wrong route to do it. We are forced to conclude that the present BJP-led government is playing the 'Muslim' card to strengthen its Hindu vote bank. This religion based election strategy can and will have serious consequences for India. We urge the Indian government to try and resolve this issue through discussion.

It is only through discussion that misgivings can be removed. Let the entire gamut of our relationship be freed from the vagaries of electoral politics.

## Good news should not come alone



HASNAT ABDUL HYE

'NO news is good news' cannot be said all the time. If it were, life would be full of despair. There would be little to feel cheerful about and to be hopeful of a better future. But good news, even when it makes appearances sparingly, takes back seat, leaving the headlines and main pages to 'bad news', as usual. Is it to ponder to the reflexes of readers conditioned to bad news or is it because of the failure of good news to assert itself? Reading the news about BRAC's micro credit programme in 2002, one cannot but wonder.

'BRAC disburses Tk. 1707 crore in 2002', a column size small caption appeared at page six in an English newspaper a few days back. The space is given one fourth of a column. A reader not having the luxury of time to go through page to page, is very likely to miss the news item in its forlorn expression. In its presentation and placement, too, it is very matter of fact and ordinary. But those who are familiar with micro credit and its role in poverty alleviation will immediately realize the importance and implications of the news. Because of this they will be puzzled, even shocked, to see the low-key and non-descript coverage given to this news at great significance. It is not for the sake of BRAC that is behind the news but the achievement conveyed that there should have been a better publicity. The news is important to all who care for the future of the country and for poverty alleviation in particular.

According to the press release issued by BRAC, Tk.1707 crores were issued by it in 2002. This is the

highest amount disbursed in a year since it started its micro credit programme in the mid-seventies. It has been claimed that BRAC's micro finance operation has become the largest programme of its kind in the world. It now covers 36 lakhs and 47 thousand members, most of whom are rural poor women. This will be news to many as the general perception is that Grameen Bank enjoys this distinction. Interested people may be curious to know the year-on-year progress in this respect to find out the rate of progress. Perhaps this is

finance programmes are also reported to have maintained similar high levels of repayment. In a country where commercial banks are saddled with dud loans and defaulters dodge repayment under one pretext or another, the high recovery rate in the micro credit programmes of NGOs is not only a matter of gratification but exemplary as well. Granted, micro credit is a different kettle of fish and cannot be compared with mega-loans running into crores of taka. But there must be a thing or two to learn even from the 'minions' in the credit market. It is

challenging goal. Many would be interested to know how was this achieved. The successful mechanism should be a model for others engaged in micro finance. But questions also may be asked about high rate of interest and other service charges in order to attain self-financing goals, if these were among the devices used. Such rates will leave poor borrower members with little surplus, it will be pointed out.

There is undoubtedly a trade-off here. Striking a reasonable and workable balance will be tricky and

are given with corresponding loan amounts available and conditions of eligibility for the borrowers. BRAC must have developed a similar system over the years to allow freedom of choice regarding the income generating activities and loan ceilings for them.

It is obvious that information required satisfying all queries cannot be provided in a press release. Perhaps these will all be available in the annual report when it is published. But wouldn't it be appropriate to issue the press release in a meeting of journalists,

butions to poverty alleviation, they should feel proud to publicize their activities appropriately. A brief press release lost in the business page of a newspaper does not come anywhere near to that obligation. It does not do justice to them and their clientele.

The press release does not mention poverty alleviation and all through uses "micro-finance operation". Though nothing is in a name because, as is well known, rose by any other name will smell the same, the failure to mention 'poverty' may indicate an isolationist attitude and fragmentary approach. The micro-finance programmes of BRAC, Grameen and other NGOs are important planks of the poverty alleviation strategy in the country. They may be operating independently but their activities are making joint contributions to the same goal. It is important to know what is the overall progress made towards poverty alleviation so that the ground still to be covered can be seen by all concerned.

As it is, the type of disclosure being made nowadays does not help to know the percentage of the poor covered and the type of poverty alleviation achieved. It behooves those participating in a national agenda to fully apprise the nation about progress made in this most critical of all spheres. If all the agencies, including the government, can make this disclosure jointly and on the same occasion, coordinated action on this intractable problem will have taken a big step forward. Given the track record of BRAC, Grameen and others news about this progress report can be expected to be always good. It will be awaited by many with eagerness and high hopes. Meanwhile, kudos to BRAC on completing yet another successful year of micro finance operation contributing to poverty alleviation.

Hasnat Abdul Hye is a former secretary, novelist and economist.

## IN MY VIEW

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available in the head office of BRAC but it would have been convenient to readers to have some more details in the press release. One also wonders why there cannot be a press conference on the occasion of releasing the annual figures on micro finance operation of this magnitude and social significance. After all, it used to be the flagship operation of BRAC and continues to be an important constituent in the overall poverty alleviation strategy in the country.

To continue with the good news, the repayment rate achieved by BRAC in its micro finance operation was 98 per cent last year. It is not only remarkable, but also spectacular, given the duration of the programme, large number of borrowers and the many risks involved in the utilization of loan money. Sustaining the efficiency of loan operation including disbursement, supervision and collection, over a long period of three decades is no mean task. Grameen Bank and a few other NGOs operating micro

puzzling that no overtures have been made from the league of the big banks about the possibility of exchanging information and sharing the experiences of micro credit operation of NGOs like BRAC and Grameen Bank.

To continue with more good news, the press release of BRAC gives a figure of Tk.496 crores as savings made by their members. If the figure is for one year it cannot but appear as very impressive. It is all the more so when the members are poor and themselves borrow for various income-generating activities. Of course, Grameen and other NGOs as well as BRDB cooperatives have provisions for such savings. The important thing is to know the savings-credit ratio. The more favourable and closer is this figure, greater is the possibility of the micro finance programme becoming self-financing. According to the press release BRAC's micro finance operation became self-financing since 2001. It may be the first NGO to have accomplished this

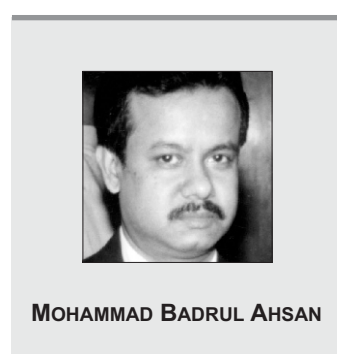
perhaps problematic. The choice may turn out to be a low equilibrium income trap at subsistence level with operational self-reliance and higher-level income equilibrium with elements of subsidy. The second option does not preclude eventual self-financing as the principle (of self-finance) can be applied gradually with increase in income levels of members. This will, of course, involve relatively complicated procedure as calculation will have to be made for each and every borrower and also on a year to year basis. Organizations interested in helping the poor to graduate out of the low-level income equilibrium, as characterized by poverty, cannot ignore this aspect.

It is seen from the brief press release of BRAC that members of the micro-finance programme are free to initiate any feasible income generating activity. This also needs elaboration as the nature of 'freedom' may vary from borrower to borrower and according to local conditions. Usually a list of options

development workers and other NGOs where more detailed reports could be distributed to meet queries? Reporters and others present could make write-ups with facts and figures for subsequent publication giving wider publicity. BRAC may think that it does not need publicity but the status of poverty in the country does. BRAC may also think that its micro-finance programme is just one among many of its operations and as such does not deserve a special emphasis.

But for those concerned with widening and deepening of poverty in the country, its micro-finance programme has critical importance as well as implications. It has so far been seen as contributing significantly to poverty alleviation. The concerned people have legitimate interest to know the present level of its intervention compared to the overall target in the country. It is in this 'global' context that it becomes important to know who is doing what and how. Since organizations like BRAC have made significant contri-

## The cornucopia of life



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

SHE cried for a long time until it started to hurt in the corner of her eyes. After a few snuffles, she wiped her tears and said to herself that her sorrow was a burden that even the wretched eyes couldn't bear. Then she put out the light and went to bed, hoping that she didn't have to see another day.

It was a cold night and she shivered under the blanket, tossing from side to side as if a lunatic was struggling inside straightjacket. She wished to have a forestate of death and stilled her body with a bated breath. She realized that spasms of sobbing were still rising from her heart, but it clanked like the suction of tube in an empty well. She had cried for a long time, and her eyes were rinsed of all the tears.

By that time she was feeling warm in the blanket, the space enveloping her body filled with heat, which reminded her that she was alive. But tonight she wanted to be cold and dead, severing her ties with a cruel world where she had suffered ever since she was conceived

in her mother's womb. At this point her thoughts jolted, and she wanted to cry again. It hurt her in the corner of her eyes and a feeble headache started spreading inside her head like mists in the air.

She wrapped the blanket tightly around her and sat down in the dark like a meditating silhouette. She felt very exhausted, her energy consumed by the fire of grief that burned inside her all day. She wondered why she came to this world and

ing inside her had abandoned her. Many times since then she wept over her misfortune, embarrassed like someone holding the bag after a heist. The pleasure of that man has left such a devastating scar in her body, her entire existence shattered by that lout who was no more to her than a honeysuckle bee was to flowers. If it were only possible, she would have liked to slit open her belly to throw out the poison that came from the groin of a scoundrel

man, who treated her like an object of pleasure, who clawed her youth like a monster crushing flowers. That man wrung out the juice of innocence, and threw her away like chaff, leaving behind the fruit of sin, which was growing inside her. She caressed her abdomen with a disconsolate heart as if to sense the depth of disgrace, which was absorbed in her bone and blood.

What would she do with the unborn child? It was growing inside

monster who had destroyed her life. She didn't know whether to cherish this child or expel it from her body, whether to indulge in the ecstasy of motherhood or ignominy of someone cheated by her lover.

The man who dragged her into this mess had told her once that there was a tribe of people who captured the enemy and made him consort with one of their women. Then they killed the man and his child to double the intensity of

the impact of tears, which streamed out of her eyes still hurting in their corners.

The sound of her sobbing echoed in the darkness, the silence of the night shattered by its vibrations bringing heaviness in the air. Her parents have threatened to abandon her unless she cleansed her womb of that smudge of shame. They wouldn't allow their daughter to bear that fruit of sin, they have said.

There are crossroads in life, she prayed, when one must seek guidance from God. She folded her hands and looked at the heavens, and closed her eyes to immerse in prayer. It was a mistake, she confessed, to be tempted by the love of a mischievous man, who treated her like dirt. But the child that was conceived was real, a memento of the innocent love that every woman cherished for her man. The conceived child had a peculiar status; it was received with a pure heart but delivered by a wicked mind.

What should she do, she asked God. Should she punish that child for sins of the adults? In the end, she was going through a process that generates life, which performs the miracle of creating life within itself. Does it matter how that life is born, since every birth is an act of God? Does it matter how it is conceived since every life is sanctioned by Him?

She wiped her tears and asked for the forgiveness of God. Then she prayed that she should be punished for her sins, but the child should be spared.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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whether she was just another lump of flesh sacrificed to a whimsical god. She opened her legs and suddenly realized that she couldn't stretch them anymore without leaning backward.

She looked down in the dark and ran her hand over the bulge that clung to her belly like an overturned pot. The love of a man she hated was growing inside her, a clod of blood expanding daily and pushing out the walls of her abdomen little by little, one life engaged in the systematic encroachment of another.

The man whose child was grow-

and was slowly mixing in her bloodstream ever since then.

Yet she couldn't do it although this thought had crossed her mind many times. It was by the way of nature, she thought, that a woman had to live with the consequences of a man's lust. Man could only be hurt by a woman's love, and her lust was no more than the yearning of a field waiting to be sowed. Man, who holds the seed, isn't in love unless he sows it from his heart.

She sat in the dark, feeling like a house trespassed by a stranger. How she had given herself to that

her like a looming specter of gloom, the gloom, which was growing hands and legs on it to walk on earth. What could she do to stop it, to destroy this apparition of shame, which would soon slither out of her womb and take its place in the world?

She was sweating inside the blanket, and started to cry again. She was stuck with this curse, which was being fed on her own flesh and blood, this wedge between love and hatred, which was tearing her apart. She didn't know what to do with the child that came from the groin of a

revenge. It was the opposite of that in her case, she ascertained. Here the enemy has doubled the intensity of his revenge by leaving the woman and her child in the gorge of death.

A column of tears rose to her throat, and she tightened the blanket around her to hold herself together. She wanted to love a man and have his child, but never thought there could be a conflict between two of them. Now she stood between two ends of her life, one that is gone and one that is forthcoming, between yesterday and tomorrow. Her body shook in

## OPINION

## An 'unwashed' activist replies

NAEEM MOHAIEEM  
writes from New York

WHENEVER there is a debate between leftists and centrists (or rightists), the left has to debate ideas, while the right gets to make fun of our clothing (unwashed) and sanity (loony). The letter from Satyajit (DS January 22) regarding my article ("Activists Fight Back," DS January 19) follows this trend. The letter cannot resist the urge to throw in gratuitous digs at the "unwashed and unemployed" who are "appeasers of evil."

Satyajit writes, "A protest against globalisation is a protest in favour of poverty." This presumes that anti-globalisation protests are against trade between nations. In fact, one of the rallying cries of the anti-globalisation movement is "fair trade, not free trade" -- we want trade to be on terms that are more favourable to developing nations. One recent example is the global coffee chain Starbucks which is notorious for buying coffee beans

from suppliers who exploit local workers. Through the action of globalisation activists, they have been forced to start stocking "fair trade" coffee, which follows some modicum of trading with non-exploitative and environmentally conscious local growers.

Some argue that globalisation activists are taking garments industry away from Bangladesh. But in fact the garments industry is dying because the US has found a cheaper supplier in China's abundant labour market, and also wants to grant quotas to countries that serve a strategic interest. We demand fair wages in all local factories, rather than a "race to the bottom" where each country competes to provide the most exploited labour. Critics will counter that when activists target Nike's unfair labour practices in Vietnam, they will simply pack up and move elsewhere. That is why we target unfair labour practices wherever they exist. In the end, the mega-corporations will have nowhere to hide and will be forced to raise

minimum wages even in the most exploitative labour markets.

Recently, the Progressive Bengali Network of San Francisco started an action against Disney sweatshops in Bangladesh. But their actions were very careful to state that they wanted Disney to stay, but to raise their minimum working standards. Similarly, when Unite! did a short documentary on Gap factories in Bangladesh, they were urged by New York Bengali activists to not create something that would result in Gap leaving Bangladesh. We are aware of the paradox that the starving Bangladeshi labourer would prefer sweatshop work to no work. We are also acutely aware that campaigns against child labour led to many children in Bangladesh being pushed into worse professions than sweatshops. These are complex issues, and one solution does not fit all. However, the solution cannot be for globalisation activists to walk away from sweatshops and just "trust" that mega-

corporations will eventually raise labour standards on their own accord.

Satyajit also writes, "How can any rational person be against genetically modified food? GM crops have been tested and used for years in the US." Again, activists are not against all GM foods, but certainly against those that are not properly tested and verified. In addition, we are against GM crops that threaten or replace indigenous crops, with the long-term goal of making third world farmers dependent on GM seeds that must be perpetually purchased from foreign multinationals or their local representatives.

Satyajit is confident that GM foods have been "tested" in the US and are therefore safe. GM food are tested here by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This is the same agency that certified Olestra as a safe "fat substitute" in food, only to discover later that it led to a condition known as "anal leakage". Olestra is still legal and has not been recalled by the FDA in

spite of negative reports. The FDA also certified ConAgra's beef as safe and free of E.coli O157:H7, even though 110,000 Americans get strains of E.coli every year. Some felt safe about the FDA's pronouncements until ConAgra had to recall 19 million pounds of beef that were contaminated by E.coli. As of this writing, not all the beef has been recovered -- I wonder whose stomachs those missing pounds are sitting in?

Satyajit ends the letter by saying, "These anti-war demonstrations are not very important." Well, after this weekend where we joined 500,000 demonstrators in DC, and another 250,000 in San Francisco, the opinion polls show that 60 per cent of Americans do not support a "rush to war" (*Newsweek*) and 53 per cent feel the President has not provided adequate justification for a war (*Pew*). In addition, Bush's approval rating for handling foreign affairs has dropped to 56 per cent, the lowest of his presidency. Since the White House under Karl Rove's tutelage cares a lot about poll

numbers and elections, I would argue that the anti-war demonstrations are having a clear impact. Could it be coincidence that the Monday (January 20) after these demonstrations (which were called the "largest since Vietnam era"), the *New York Times* changed its position and gave an endorsement to the anti-war movement, or that the administration is now talking about negotiating exile for Saddam Hussein as a way to avoid war? By the way, we are not "appeasers of evil" -- none of us are supporters of Saddam Hussein, we just don't support a unilateral war to force him out. The dominant slogan at Saturday's rally was, "Let the Inspections Work."

Satyajit uses cliches about demonstrators being "pierced", "unwashed" and "unemployed" (code for "rebellious teenagers"). In fact, the January 18th rallies were marked by the total participation of mainstream America. The one-time dominance of the anti-war movement by International ANSWER (which can be called

"radical left") has now been challenged by United for Peace, an umbrella group of 120 mainstream organisations, and Win Without War, a coalition of religious groups, labour unions, business and civic leaders, and Vietnam Vets. Even the *Christian Science Monitor* (hardly a "leftist" paper) concluded, "As the antiwar movement tries to gain momentum, it is gradually bringing with it more mainstream Americans, people who have never attended a rally or carried a sign."

Satyajit seems under the misimpression that the protestors are sitting around reading "The Communist Manifesto." In fact, we are more likely to be reading updated practical political frameworks in books like Naomi Klein's "No Logo", Eric Schlosser's "Fast Food Nation" and Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel & Dimed: On (Not) Getting By In America."

Satyajit also repeats the tired lie that the demonstrators want to "spread the virus of communism". Besides the fact that such over-

heated rhetoric is lifted verbatim from Joseph McCarthy's discredited "red scare" witch-hunts of the 1950s, it's just not true. The activists are campaigning to create an equitable society and world.

In addition to all of the problems bedeviling the world, closer to home in America there is a full-blown crisis of inequality. Today, 9.6 million Americans are unemployed, 41.2 million are without health insurance, 32.9 million live in poverty, 3 million are homeless (out of which 1 million are children) and 13 million children live in families without adequate supply of food" [Source: *New York Times*]. The protestors are not just fighting against war, they are fighting to eradicate inequalities like this from our world. Is that what Satyajit refers to as "a virus"?

Naem Mohaiem runs Shobak.org, a website for "Outsider Asian Voices."