

Myanmar FM's visit Positive aspects receive focus

At a time when Yangon has been receiving adverse publicity for incarcerating Aung San Suu Kyi and worldwide pressure is mounting on the military regime to release her, the country's Foreign Minister U Win Aung visited us on his way to New Delhi. Apart from being weather-taking in nature, the trip seemed designed to secure assurances from neighbouring countries that they would not allow their territories to be used for any external intervention in the country. Bangladesh is undoubtedly committed towards establishment of democracy wherever it is absent, but the pressure to get a country abide by democratic norms need not transform into a military action.

Whilst we would like the Myanmar government to restore democracy in the country at the earliest, some of the lingering problems in the relationship merited resolution without any further delay. In this category of pressing but forward-looking agenda fall repatriation of the Rohingya refugees stranded in Bangladesh; construction of Dhaka-Yangon highway; removal of trade imbalance currently tilted towards Myanmar; and final delimitation of maritime boundary between the two countries.

Dhaka has 'obtained' commitments from the visiting Myanmar FM to take back the last batch of 20,000 Rohingya refugees languishing in Cox's Bazar camps together with assurances of diplomatic support for Bangladesh's membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Dhaka's bid for such an ASEAN berth is important in light of her foreign policy thrust towards South East Asia. Myanmar and Bangladesh are strategically important to each other insofar as Yangon provides the bridge-head to the southeast Asian region, both in terms of the sea-lane as well as overland access. Which is why it is of paramount importance to both countries that pursuant to the principle of equity established in the North Sea Continental Self case (1969) by the International Court of Justice, that their maritime boundary is demarcated sooner than later.

That the stalled Dhaka-Yangon road-link has been activated is positive news. However, in this era of greater market inter-penetration between neighbouring or intra- and inter-regional countries, the ultimate test of expanding bilateral relations lies in revving up trade and investment cooperation. The low-profile trading between Myanmar and Bangladesh is simply inexplicable given their physical proximity and natural endowments. The inherent potentials they have for greater trade will have to be tapped with a sense of history going back to British era and a commitment to the future betterment of the two peoples.

Say 'no' to dowry

Only awareness and collaborative efforts can make it happen

THAT the social menace called 'dowry' pauperises hundreds of families in rural Bangladesh came into sharp focus following the new World Bank country director Christine Wallich's visit to a Jamalpur village on Saturday. The women of Kendua Dewani Bazar themselves identified it as one of the main reasons triggering poverty in the area. Their introspective finding is an eye opener of sorts. The understanding of the problem by the villagers has 'impressed' Ms Wallich herself. The World Bank funded project in the area has made an alarming discovery. According to their findings, almost 85 per cent of the families in the village are landless, their pauperisation taking place mostly through dowry-related payments. And, the number is increasing.

This may just be the tip of the iceberg. The situation can't be allowed to be accentuated. To our mind, the first option is to make the rural people aware of the extreme negative impact of the dowry menace by a constant hammering on it. Just get it into their system to reject it. Projects similar to the one in Jamalpur can help the poor and vulnerable groups in attaining self-esteem. Making the country free of dowry should be the new *mantra* for all of us. Taking cue from the residents in Kendua, villagers in other parts of the country can also sit together and identify their problems and ways out of them. It's for their own good that they realise where their weaknesses and strengths lie.

Poverty can be attributed to two sets of causes. First, it's the infrastructural inadequacy. Until that's improved significantly, no lift-pump effect on poverty eradication can be expected. Secondly, it's the social factors. And dowry being dominant among them, specific steps need to be taken to tackle it. The positive outcome of the WB project will have to be replicated. Until there is homing in on the problems of poverty, no attempt to stem the scourge can be successful. Needless to say, where strict laws fail, a well-executed awareness programme succeeds.

Tales of the tail-enders



ABDUL BAYES

IN the context of rural Bangladesh, generally, females are expected to feed family first and themselves last. They are supposed to sleep late but rise early. The males mostly take household decisions, although females have largely to look after the activities. Working outside homestead boundary is almost banned for them. By and large, females are, regrettably, tail-enders in the realm of rural realities in Bangladesh. And such treatment to the females, and the traditions growing around them, trace back to time immemorial.

But things seem to have been changing, albeit at a slower pace, over the years. Especially the last decade witnessed the development of females on different fronts. Females in rural areas are now reported to be in the front line in many ways. May be that pervasive presence of poverty propelled a change of perceptions in the whole spectrum of societal superstitions. There are, in fact, many stories in circulation where females are reported to be in the frontline of education, business, services, social works etc. For my readers, however, I shall pick up few "resource poor" females who are basically farmers -- looking after both pre-and post-harvest operations of their agriculture. They seem to struggle to survive and survive to struggle but never surrender. However, first, few words on "resource poor".

Definitional dilemma

There is perhaps, neither dearth of data dealing with the poor nor poverty, nor a dearth of definition on the poor. Economists had long been at loggerheads over detecting the attributes of the poor and their poverty levels. Consensus on this count is yet to come but one concept is clear from all sides: the poor and poverty are multi-dimensional aspects, not to be left to the domain of income or any other single criterion of causation. Therefore, the definition of the "resource poor" that we shall use in subsequent submissions could, possibly, produce storm over a cup of tea. But let us see the justification

behind the definition.

PETRA's poor

The Poverty Elimination Through Rice Research Assistance (PETRA) project of IRRI adopted the concept of 'resource poor farmers' (RPFs) in their project paraphernalia. One could cast serious doubt as to whether poverty of a segment of population can be eliminated even after deploying all the arms at the armoury, not to speak of rice researches alone. But

ity of tiny rice lands would tantamount to a titanic outcome. Unfortunately, in the past, the RPFs have hardly been addressed by the NGOs, governmental interventions or even by researchers. All roads led to either the "haves" (large, medium) or the "have-nots" (landless or functionally landless) with little focus on those lying in between. Whereas, their proportion as farmers is reportedly rising and I reckon that they would even become the soldiers of the future

of demand and better chances of export. Admittedly, the prices of these rice varieties are two to three times the rice they are growing at almost the same cost and with same care.

Lady with the land

Very recently, I met 16 "resource poor" females, engaged in and enlightened by the various projects of PETRA-partners in the village of Krishnanagar. The training on farm seeds, MVs, input

harvesting seeds. Reportedly, they roam around their rice plots to see that things move as per prescriptions. All of them know about soil conditions and types, crops to be grown in different plots, hiring labour and other inputs etc. During the planting time, they are reported to sit on the aisle to see for themselves that proper distances are maintained between plants and rows -- the teaching that they got from training. During the last boro season, Masuda Begum and

growing MVs, use of balanced fertilizer etc. are the technologies that would suit them. The only problem was that they were not aware of these and especially if available, these were for males only. The females in Krishnanagar village gave me the impression that females could be equally good farmers -- if not better -- than the males. According to them, the new techniques of seed preservation, growing MVs and resource management increased the yield of rice almost two times!

Poor and puzzle

At the last leg of our long discussions, I put before all of the 16 females a puzzle: "mention three (as per importance) things that you would expect from your 'pro-poor' politicians to do for you". I observed that 10 of them mentioned seed first, saplings second and education (primary) third. Four of them noted saplings first, training second and seed third. And finally two of them mentioned, in order of priority, help for housing, goat/bullock, education.

Notice, first, that although called poor, none of them expected any relief or doles from their "dear" political leaders. Second, none of them expected consumption items e.g. cash help, clothing, wheat or rice etc. Finally, all of them expected investment items from their leaders. Surely, seed, saplings and education, if properly provided, could go a long way in alleviating their poverty and generating future income. Among them, Ayesha said to me: *ekjone bish khaile ekjone moray, kintu ekjone biz khaile ghorer shobai moray* (drinking poison kills one but eating up seeds as food, kills everyone in the house).

However, the puzzle that I threw to them bounced back to me. I wondered as to how could these resource poor females be so rich in perceptions about the future stream of benefits and costs of seed, saplings and education. I presume the NGOs working there might have caused some influence and the electronic media, some impact. But the most important cause could be the Chaynovian hypothesis of subsistence pressures.

Driving back to Srirongal, I was recollecting their responses. The road was patchy and bumpy. Economic development -- said a famous economist -- is a treacherous road. I hope the females that I met would overcome their barriers and start for a smooth sailing. There seems light at the end of the tunnel.

Abdul Bayes is a Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

I wondered as to how could these resource poor females be so rich in perceptions about the future stream of benefits and costs of seed, saplings and education. I presume the NGOs working there might have caused some influence and the electronic media, some impact. But the most important cause could be the Chaynovian hypothesis of subsistence pressures... There seems light at the end of the tunnel.

one could equally agree with the view that poverty could be curtailed by a respectable margin only through rice researches. Any way, the RPFs of PETRA-led projects are supposed to have the few features. First, farming should be their main source of income and employment. Second, they cultivate a meagre amount of land -- 100 decimals or so. This could be either own land, others' land or a combination of both. Third, they tend to generate additional income by working for 100 days/year or so on others' land. And finally, they have provisions for rice from own farms for 6-7 months of the year.

Quite understandably, PETRA's poor are not extreme poor. With the endowments of land and labour, they would have at best fulfilled the 2200-calorie needs of the household members and can be described as "moderate poor". They are poor because of limited resources and not because of a lack of it which applies for the extreme poor. However, such poor are always on the fringe of a fall and once fallen, could swell the ranks of the extreme poor. PETRA's purpose is to arrest the fall of today's moderate poor or the rise of tomorrow's poor.

Arguably, that could occur if the RPFs could utilise their land optimally by devoting the full potentials of male and female members of the households and by using the most cost-effective means of managing resources -- at their disposal -- for increased output. And since rice accounts for three-fourths of their calorie intake, along with their employment and two-thirds of household budgets, supposedly any attempt to raise the productiv-

self-sufficiency in rice in Bangladesh.

Ipsa facto, targeting them is a timely concern. The objectives should be to provide them with information, knowledge and technology that they can easily sail in to survive, given their resource endowments. For example, we can provide them with (a) foundation seeds to grow more seeds to exchange with other farmers in and around; (b) training with regard to roting and preservation techniques of seeds in the wake of a 15-20 per cent loss of output from sick or bad seeds; (c) training on the uses of balanced fertilizer in the face of their preoccupation with urea only and losing fertility of soil and hence output; (d) introducing the economics of growing FAG -- Fine, Aromatic and Glutinous -- rice that has higher income elasticity

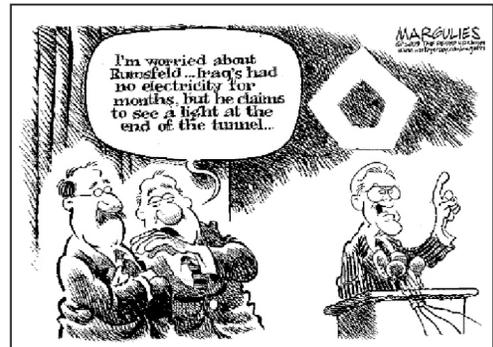
management, and others are led by Agricultural Advisory Society (AAS) in this village, both for males and females. The village is almost half way between Dhaka and Srirongal, Sylhet. It has a population of 2000 and households 200 or so (imagine the density). Half of the households are landless with only homestead land, and half also are pure tenants. So, the features of the village, possibly, justify the name 'Krishnanagar' -- a place under the dark.

I was curious to talk to Masuda Begum (45), Ayesha Begum (40) and Minara Akhter (30) as I was told that they are female farmers. In our rural areas, females mostly carry out post harvest operations but these three females have been at the forefront of the agricultural operations of their households. Thus, they are engaged in seed-to-seed activities i.e. growing seeds to

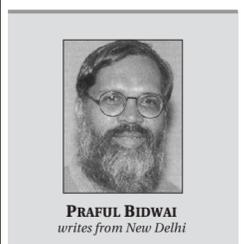
her husband harvested the whole crop of their 28 decimal plot. Masuda also carried the harvests home. "Otherwise I would have to pay Tk.700-800 for contracting out", she told me. Ayesha appeared more agile, active and energetic. Minara appeared relatively shy but sagacious. According to the villagers, the ladies who got training on agricultural operations, especially these three front liners, are doing extremely well. "You need not have to have sons if you have daughters like them", a wealthy villager who praised their efforts towards uplift, told me. That does not, however, mean that their males have no role to play. "They reportedly play a minor role", some of the females who were present during the dialogue said to me.

Of course, I could detect the degree of their developing dominance from a simple question: who is your household head? Masuda looked at her husband sitting nearby, smiled and said, "actually my husband. But I do the most works for the family and hence you can say both of us are household heads!" Ayesha and Minara expressed the same sentiment.

The females that I met there informed me that their economic conditions have been improving over the years. I presumed that the Dhaka-Sylhet highway passing by the village and the operations of some NGOs could have contributed to that on the non-farm side. The PETRA-partners seemingly signalled an option from the agricultural side where they could manage their own food provisions from growing more rice from the same amount of land. All of them agreed that preservation of seeds,



Reality check on IT: Masters or cyber-coolies?



PRAFUL BIDWAI

writes from New Delhi

THE success of India's information technology (IT) industry has produced such euphoric reactions that some of the enthusiasts have declared India a "knowledge-based society" and "information superpower". This description sounds extremely odd in a country in which almost half the population is illiterate, the level of skills low, and transmission of knowledge restricted by caste and gender hierarchies.

India's computer software export boom is admittedly a success story, with annual growth of 40 percent-plus or more over a decade. But the euphoria is misplaced -- and not only because growth has slowed down to 26 percent.

For all its contribution for India's economy, IT remains an "island" phenomenon. It cannot drive the country into another development "stage" -- for three reasons.

First, the IT business remains extremely (80 percent) export-dependent. This is even truer of

information technology-enabled services (ITES) like call centres, medical transcription and business-process outsourcing (BPO) which are growing twice faster than software exports.

The best estimate of the size of India's indigenous IT sector, including hardware and domestic software, is under 2 percent of GDP. By contrast, trade and hospitality account for 15 percent of GDP. Even in external accounts, software exports (\$7.2 billion) contribute less than remittances, mainly from Gulf workers (\$8.1

Only four IT companies figure in the *Economic Times* list of top 100 corporations (in sales). IT companies' profits are high and share prices stellar. But their turnover is limited.

Third, the geographical distribution of IT is more uneven than that of literacy, education, or infrastructure. Of total IT exports, the South alone accounts for over 50 percent. The North is a distant second (26 percent). The East lags at just 2 percent.

There are no signs that these huge gaps are narrowing. This too

Association of Software and Service Companies, ITES "has the potential of creating one million direct jobs by 2008" largely through outsourcing or farming out by the West.

India has emerged as an outsourcing destination because of ITES advantages like low costs, language, and policy stability, according to investment banking research firm, Breen Murrury Research. The firm says India should adopt the outsourcing model as a "strategic necessity". However, this hope is running up

because he couldn't face the prospect of losing his job to outsourcing. Ironically, before being sacked, he helped train the very Indians who took over his job.

Flanagan's circumstances were not exceptional. He was one of some 800,000 Americans who lost their jobs to outsourcing last year alone.

This has prompted New Jersey to ban the export of IT-related state contracts. Missouri, Connecticut, Washington, Maryland are also moving in that direction.

Here, young women and men work painfully long hours practising cultivated American accents to sell products they have never seen -- all for a pittance. This disembodied work relationship, and low wages -- lower than even a bank chaprasi's -- are turning these people into cyber-coolies... This isn't something we should be proud of. We must get into high-end, high-value-added services, which alone can upgrade our people's skills, raise incomes and redistribute wealth.

billion).

Even if optimistically the ITES/BPO business grows five- or eight-fold over five years, its GDP contribution will remain small.

Second, despite their meteoric rise, most IT companies are puny by Indian corporate standards, their sales being about one-tenth of those manufacturing sector majors.

It is only this year that India's largest IT company, Tata Consultancy Services, joined the "One Billion Club", with revenues exceeding Rs. 4,800 crores. Other IT giants, like Infosys and Wipro, have lower revenues.

doesn't speak of a national-level "growth engine". There are other constraints too, such as poor infrastructure, low telecom density (just five out of 100 Indians are connected), and poor penetration of computers (less than 6 per thousand people, as compared to China's 19).

Many IT strategists pin their hopes on the rapid recent expansion of IT-enabled services. Their growth spurred last year by 59 percent.

ITES now contributes a quarter of India's IT exports and has created 160,000 jobs. ITES boasts of a 65:35 female-male employment ratio. According to the National

against obstacles. The greatest obstacle is rising awareness in the West that India's ITES has grown largely because of outsourcing. Well-known consultant Forrester Research estimates that 3.3 million service-sector jobs will leave the US by 2015, half of them for India.

In Britain, *The Sunday Times* carried the "shock and horror" headline: "Banks prepare to shift 200,000 jobs to India". This has alarmed trade unionists into launching a campaign against India's call centres.

These aren't all crying-wolf stories. In the US, Silicon Valley programmer Kevin Flanagan recently shot himself to death,

Why is India an outsourcing "threat"? In the US, it costs \$43,000 to hire a full-time ITES employee. An Indian employee costs \$6,180, or seven times less. Because of time-zone difference, India can provide round-the-clock service all days of the week.

Big companies like General Electric report 85 percent-plus "satisfaction" ratings for their Indian employees. There is a large pool of English speaking low-skilled manpower in India. All this makes it a corporate attraction -- and a Western worker's nightmare!

The crux is low wages. India's ITES-BPO, like its software busi-

ness, is heavily concentrated in low-paid jobs. Indian companies have developed few software products. They develop sub-p a c o k a - g e s / a s s e m b l i e s / p r o g r a m s that go into the final products marketed by US companies.

A good proportion of the sub-programmes in Windows 95 and 98 were developed by Indian engineers. But it's Mr Bill Gates who skimmed off the profits!

In call centres, the situation is even worse. Here, young women and men work painfully long hours practising cultivated American accents to sell products they have never seen -- all for a pittance. This disembodied work relationship, and low wages -- lower than even a bank chaprasi's -- are turning these people into cyber-coolies.

This isn't something we should be proud of. We must get into high-end, high-value-added services, which alone can upgrade our people's skills, raise incomes and redistribute wealth. We must set our sights high.

That implies ambitious goals for manpower training, skill generation, backward-region development, export content rules, etc.

Western companies won't do that for us. Setting our goals in accordance with our people's needs and resources is the only way we can move from being cyber-coolies with no rights and little security, to dignified workers who control their own labour.

Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist.

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Speedy trial but delayed enforcement

In last few days we heard many sensational murder case verdicts. It is a good sign for our judiciary system. No doubt these verdicts will have a serious impact on our deteriorating law and order situation. But the result will be zero if the enforcement of these verdicts become late.

The legal proceeding of appellate division should be as fast as special speedy courts. Only then the criminals will feel insecure and the general people will live peace and security.

Sohel Bin Seraj
Mymensingh
After the 9/11

The world has changed much after G W Bush has become the president of the United States. It seems that an evil force is at work, there is turmoil every where. All these started after the attack on the Twin Towers. This incident made a ground that justified wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq. They called it "war on terrorism".

Israel's warm relation with the US is known to everyone, their interests always come first and despite protests from all over the world Iraq was invaded for Israel's benefit. Bush and Blair said that they want to free Iraqi people from the dictator Saddam Hussain. There are so many religious sects in Iraq, like the Shiite, Sunni, and Kurds and because of the differences among themselves Iraq

seems to be always in a state of trouble. US and Britain said they have come to save the people of Iraq but what happened in reality is quite different than what they imagined, now the people in Iraq feel that another dictator has replaced Saddam Hussain, they do not want Americans and British troops in Iraqi land.

Everyday more innocent people are dying in Iraq. Iraq did not pose any direct threat to the US, but in the process of the war against terrorism president Bush put the Americans in a more vulnerable position than before. He completely ignored the world protest against war and breaded hatred against the Americans and also against Britain since Tony Blair joined hands with Mr. Bush in this

unjustified action. My hopes for a peaceful world is very dim now, despair and sadness have engulfed me, I am afraid even to think about the future of mankind. Will my plea for peace ever reach to the ears of the likes of G.W. Bush or Tony Blair?

Nur Jahan
Chittagong

WMD sites looted

Isn't George Bush making a mockery of the US Presidency by stating that the WMD sites were looted and burned during the waning days of Saddam Hussein's rule (DS, June 22). This statement has neither any sense of diplomacy nor politics. It is the cry of a failed

diplomat, desperate and struggling to cling on to the helm of US Presidency and is clearly incriminated by his own earlier statements. I feel pity for him!

S.M.A. Rashid,
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

Quorum crisis

Quorum crisis in recent times has reached to the point of everybody's concern. This problem seems to have stated as soon as the new government took over and the most frustrating part is that all the members of the house are responsible for this crisis. It has got a negative impact on the national economy and as well as on our voter's. A survey by the Transparency International shows that the quo-

rum crisis in the fourth, fifth and the sixth parliament session has cost the country no less than 20 million taka. I wonder what example is our honourable members are setting for us.

Why the people have elected them? For a poor country like us how can the members of the parliament afford to behave so irresponsibly? We, the people of Bangladesh, voted them to discuss the problems on various issues on our behalf inside the parliament. But what happens in reality is quite the opposite. This is not at all acceptable either from the side of our members nor favourable for the development of our country. It is true that we have a lot of problems as a developing country, like we need to increase literacy, good health service, infra-

structure development and to overcome all these problems first we must increase our sense of responsibility. Only after that we can discuss to find out ways to solve other problems. And this is the reason the session of the parliament takes place for.

The opposition parties also have an important role to play in the parliament. They have the same responsibilities as the ruling party. But the truth is that both of them are equally irresponsible. It is their duty to sort out the problems existing in this case of quorum crisis.

All I want to say is that I wish for the parliament to be a meaningful place as it is meant for. Because of this, I have some suggestions, firstly everyone should have the tendency to

attend the parliament in due time and that includes the Prime Minister and ministers as well. Secondly, it should not go on for many days and the speaker should adjourn it as soon as possible to avoid the additional costs. Thirdly, everyone involved should come forward and take the necessary steps to end this crisis. Because this particular problem portrays both the ruling and the opposition party in a very irresponsible fashion. Discuss about the reforms of politics and the economics, make healthy criticism of the proposed budget and finally make the Jatiya Sangshad a worthwhile place.

MD Noor-E-Alam
Sylhet