

Transit and free trade with India

The free trade and transit package with India, when actualised, will give us far more gains than it will to India. Transit without free trade would mean the movement of Indian goods through Bangladesh, but free trade would increase the possibility of Bangladeshi goods and services going across the border to the Indian side as well.

NIZAM AHMED

"The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible."

--George Washington

PRESUMABLY, winning power is more important for Bangladesh's politicians than the prosperity of the nation. It was different with Bangabandhu, who, at his peak, famously said that the "does not want the office of the Prime Minister but the rights of the people." Ever since then, there has been no politician following that example of putting the people's cause before personal political interest. Perhaps, this is why despite three elections since 1991, there has been neither stunning development nor ample reform in the country.

Our political course is one where parties shun serious issues other than those that are irrelevant to the people. Problems such as electricity generation have been the biggest failure of all governments but no mainstream political parties have any public policies on how to produce sufficient electricity. They keep these issues to sort out when, or if, elected to power, or in organising demonstrations to seize and burn electricity offices to show people they care, but without proposing effective solutions. Unless ideas are public and openly discussed and debated, it is difficult for any government or political party to solve national problems in the absence of informed public opinion.

Bureaucratic red tape and unfair business interests sabotage reforms when they are without the people's support. Through various means, vested groups dupe politicians into corruption and other regulative deceit. The energy sector, for exam-

ple, is vast, and requires private FDI, in competition with World Bank money for the public sector, but the possibilities are blocked as there are no favourable options for liberal private investments in the severely under-performing but highly corrupt energy sector.

Free trade and transit to India is another subject that politicians do not address. The Awami League government in 1972 had a one-year agreement with India for the "use of their waterways, railways, and roadways for commerce between the two countries and for passage of goods between two places in one country through the territory of the other." The AL government under Sheikh Hasina in 1996-2001 also agreed to reopen the old Bongaon (India) and Jessore (Bangladesh) broad gauge railway line closed since the India-Pakistan war in 1965.

Earlier, the Ershad government signed a working agreement in 1990 with India to reopen the broad gauge. Begum Zia's government in 1993 made transit facilities conditional on the Farakka water issue. In 2006, it again snubbed Indian plea for transit on grounds of water sharing, national security, and domestic trade protection.

Thus, no agreement between Bangladesh and India went beyond official desks and long-standing issues between the two countries remains bottlenecked, as there is no public debate and discussion initiated by the leadership. The fear of unresponsive public opinion, of the establishment turning against them, and their own lack of credibility or acumen, keeps politicians away from necessary deliberations on issues as free trade and transit to India.

Bangladesh's politicians fanatically focus on winning or clutching to government power. Their heart is in nothing else. The party leadership, mostly, is unbearably clannish and

the leaders pathological autocrats. The Awami League cannot be the alternative to BNP if people are aspiring for authentic democracy. Any student of political science would confirm that democracy in Bangladesh, where the ruling government enjoys "absolute power" that "corrupts absolutely," is not genuine.

The Awami League, non-stop, seeks reforms to the caretaker system solely for winning power but they never make an issue of important and long-standing political restructuring such as: decentralisation, judicial sovereignty, media independence, constitutionally mandatory internal party democracy, neutral police, or economic liberalisation. In the absence of these, no elections, even free and fair, can bring any good to the people.

Democracy in Bangladesh is entirely a "winner takes all" disorder that make power struggle violent, bloody, and damaging for people and property. Our local laureates, instead of pursuing the impossible task of selecting honest parliamentary candidates, can begin a movement for genuine democracy to take place. The legal system, if democracy is real, is sufficient to penalize the corrupt, thereby deterring the dishonest.

Nevertheless, before the Indo-Pak war in 1965, rail links facilitating goods and people between India and Bangladesh existed since the British colonial times. One reason for Bangladesh's economy sliding backwards in the past few decades is its isolation that began in 1965 cutting off links to markets and commerce with neighbouring India. Bangladesh is historically, geographically, and commercially closer to India than to any other member of Saarc and normal trading is important for both the peoples.

Government's trade policies that restrict rural cross border trading with

India or other neighbouring countries deprive Bangladesh's rural population, nearly 80% of the total, of secondary sources of income and livelihood. Farming, the world over, depends on favourable weather that is always unpredictable. Furthermore, agricultural input such as diesel, seed, and fertiliser are persistently erratic in supply and price. Cross border trading help farmers to sustain themselves and even to prosper, but complex rules and protectionist policies have made trading the exclusive domain of city dwellers queuing with banks and bureaucrats for permits and paperwork.

Some 200 years back, Adam Smith's endorsement of international division of labour, and after him, David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage laid the principles of free trade between countries, but it took heroic efforts by men as Richard Cobden [1802-1865] to make it work as in Britain. Cobden was a parliamentarian and a successful cotton trader during the times of Sir Robert Peel, Lord Palmerston, and William Gladstone. He opposed laws that protected the rich farming aristocrats and his public agitation swept away protectionism with the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s. Thereafter, the consumer prices of essentials as corn, barley, oat, and wheat, came within the reach of British people, but protectionist tendencies do not disappear unless fought consistently.

Similarly, it is necessary for Bangladeshi people to oppose the vested class favouring protectionism. However, our politicians, usually, do not have the dedication or the intellectual conviction to stand up for critical issues such as free trade and transit. Therefore, these matters are sadly in the hands of planners and schemers who freeze the liberalisation process with complex regulations and extended lobbying to protect their interests.

There are strong claims that India will swamp the Bangladeshi economy by its sheer size, as many theoreticians predict, and as the market nearly prove today, but one must only look to the example of Hong Kong, a free exporting and importing country that

has been flourishing next to mainland China for years. Similar free trade system is in Taiwan and Singapore. They became strong economic powers by keeping their economies open. It is their liberal economic principles not their size or balanced trade accounts that have kept their economy healthy and rich.

Indisputably, Bangladesh's trade deficit with India means trade surplus with another, as with the US. America has trade deficit with China but a surplus with Hong Kong, and many others. We, as consumers, have trade deficit with our local shops, but we never expect the shops to buy something in return to balance our books. It is no different for national accounts. There should not be much hullabaloo over any bilateral deficit. No trader forces Indian goods upon Bangladeshi consumers: they are freely chosen and no one should disallow that individual choice and freedom.

To develop an economy, free trade must not be conditional or reciprocal with countries, but unilateral, as greater market freedom leads to greater wealth for people. The free market economy is not independent or self-reliant but inter-reliant and interdependent. Free market or free trade is an exchange and discovery process that views people as gifted and ingenious.

Transit rights are synchronous and unified with free trade, and India will have transit rights when Bangladesh is politically ready for liberalised trade. Until then, protectionism is wrong, an economic error sustained for unjust reward for a few manufacturers and traders.

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LEST WE FORGET

Rasul Nizam

A friend, guide and philosopher

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

I did not have an older brother, I was the eldest in my family. But I always longed for one. In his inscrutable ways Allah humours even the least devout. I was given by Him the most precious gift that I could ask for -- Rasul Nizam who occupied nearly four decades of my life as my older brother, my friend, my guide, and philosopher.

In his inscrutable ways, Allah has also snatched this precious gift away from me. But Allah has preference over me. He wants to have the best among us to be with Him rather than with us. For me, I can only thank Allah for the memories that Rasul Bhai has left, the four decades of friendship and camaraderie that span my youth and my middle age that now is galloping toward old age. While we mourn his loss, we also would like to celebrate the life and memories of this great soul (May 1 was his anniversary of birth) who gave us so much to thank him for.

They say it is impossible that a man could unite the talents of head and heart, and still be a good business leader. To succeed in business or in your profession, you separate the head from your heart, they say. You keep your charms for more convivial settings, parties for example, they further say. But Rasul Bhai was the anti-thesis of this conventional image. He succeeded in his profession not only for the head that he carried over his shoulder but also the heart that he carried inside. He was a brilliant student, an outstanding business leader, a decorated diplomat, an admirable social leader, and above all, a loving father to his children Rawaya and Rafay, and an endearing husband to his wife Sultana Nizam.

My memories of Rasul Nizam the man I knew, a mentor I revered would need years to recount. More difficult is that I do not know where to begin. For brevity of time, I will recount only a couple.

The most oft remembered anecdote puts me back to 1973. I was Private Secretary to Mr Kamruzzaman, Commerce Minister at that time. The country was still recovering from the chaos of the war, and our commerce and industry were faltering at best -- much due to the

vacuum created by the departure of experts who had managed many of the industrial and commercial establishments. While the country at large suffered the loss of experts, there were our own nationals who profited from this exodus. The expatriate managers were replaced with our nationals.

Against this backdrop, Rasul Nizam who I had come to know only a year before made an unusual request to my minister. Could he please do something to persuade the British Director of National Brokers company to stay in Bangladesh for a couple of more years? Was he crazy, I asked? Everybody in Bangladesh wanted the expatriates to leave so that they could occupy those chairs. Would not Rasul Nizam, who was the second man in the company benefit from the exit of his British boss? "Yes", Rasul Nizam answered; "but that would benefit me only, and not the business or my company. My company needs his 'expertise'", he added. I think the British Director did stay for a longer period, and Rasul Bhai did not lose the expertise right away. To this day I cannot think of another person who made personal gains secondary to the larger good of the community and the country.

The second is more personal. This took place in December of 1981 when I was visiting New York, on my winter break from Cornell University. Rasul Bhai happened to be visiting New York and was staying with Ferooz Sobhan, our Deputy Permanent Representative at the UN that time. Ferooz Sobhan invited me to the New Year's party that he was having at his Manhattan apartment, and Rasul Nizam was one of his guests of honour. This was a double delight for me, and I appeared there much before midnight. I cannot recall the guests list, but all I remember there was Rasul Nizam surrounded by a host of colourful people of both sexes, and was at his height entertaining them with his wit and savvy that he always carried with him. When I was pondering if it was appropriate for me to break the court that he was holding, he saw me and ran to embrace me. From that moment I became the centre of his attention. We would actually chat through the whole night.

The hostess reminded Rasul Bhai



several times that there were other guests also who would like to chat with him. Rasul Bhai replied he could meet them later, but could not let go of me as I was leaving the next morning. To him it was more important to give time to an old friend who had come a long way to meet with him (Cornell is 250 miles away from New York city) than party with people he barely knew. These traits, love, care and attention, were hallmark of Rasul Nizam persona -- the traits that endeared him to the countless of his friends, relatives, and well-wishers.

Khuda Baksh, the great Indian scholar who founded the famous Oriental Library in Patna, was known for such dedication to reading and library collection that he would lose contact with his family for days. It is said of him that when informed of his son's death while he was researching in the library, he just lifted his head once and said "Innah lillah...." and went back to his studies. A few months later Khuda Buksh was again informed in the library that his brother had died. This time, Khuda Buksh threw away the books, and started crying like a child. Puzzled by his behaviour the informer asked Khuda Buksh why he was unmoved when his son had died, and now he was crying to no end when his brother had died. Khuda Buksh replied, "When I lose a child I can beget another, but when I lose a brother I cannot get back another brother." I have lost Rasul Bhai, I cannot get back another Rasul Bhai. But his memories will last forever. May Allah bless his soul!

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A challenge for American Muslims

While it is undeniable that there is a need to educate Americans about Islam and Muslims, perhaps our efforts will go further if more of us engaged in deeds rather than words. Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, an act of charity is worth a thousand sermons. So here's a humble suggestion to my fellow American Muslims: Let's cut down on the number of seminars and conferences at our local mosques by about half, and replace them with charitable acts that help the homeless, the needy and the destitute. That will require more effort than writing a check or listening to an Imam expound on the same tired topic. But in the end, it will make us better Muslims.

HASAN ZILLUR RAHIM

AMERICANS know more about Islam than ever before -- and they don't like what they see.

A new CBS News poll conducted in April suggests that 45% of Americans hold negative views of Islam, compared to 33% in the tense aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. A Washington Post-ABC News poll in March also showed a growing number of Americans (46%) expressing unfavourable opinions of Islam.

The situation has become so bleak that Muslim religious leaders sought the help of a Nobel Laureate to stem this rising tide of negativity. The Dalai Lama led leaders from Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Native American traditions at "A Gathering of Hearts Illuminating Compassion" conference in San Francisco recently. The leaders appealed to Americans not to equate Islam with terrorism.

What makes these polls so scary for Muslims is that the queried Americans confirmed that they were better informed about Islam now than they were five years ago.

In other words, despite all the mosque open houses, outreach and interfaith programs, books and articles on Islam, the idea that increased knowledge will lead to greater tolerance toward Islam and Muslims has become more elusive than ever.

Is there a contradiction here? Not really, if you think about it. Consider

the situation from the point of view of an average American.

During the week of April 10-16 alone (a remarkable convergence of Passover, Easter and the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), the average American learned that Zacarias Moussaoui, the Al Qaeda terrorist, had "no regrets, no remorse" for the nearly 3,000 people killed on September 11, 2001.

There is the consistent horror of Sunnis and Shias dismembering each other in Iraq and Pakistan, always when the gathering is large, as during the Friday congregational prayers.

There is also the daily genocide that the Muslim Janjaweed militia wages against the indigenous tribes of Darfur, Sudan, most of who are also Muslims but of darker skins.

Yes, most Muslims are as outraged by these horrors as the average American in question. But isn't it too much to expect that this typical American will continue to be reassured by our words (the fanatics are not of us and we are not of them, and besides, every faith has its fanatics) while the horrific deeds continue unabated?

He (the average American) sees what Muslims are doing to Muslims, how some of them are spewing murderous hatred for the West, and while he may hold his own country responsible for the catastrophe in Iraq, it does not diminish his growing conviction that Muslims are disproportionately prone to violence. Talk of peace and harmony can only go so far; he is more persuaded by the grim reality on the

ground.

In the same week, however, quiet and recurring events of different sorts were taking place throughout America, far removed from the gaze of the mainstream media.

In a crime-infested neighbourhood in East Oakland, California, for example, two Muslims stand at a street corner, giving out free popcorn and cotton candy to passers-by. Their only goal is to spread some cheer and hope to their downtrodden neighbours. With help from their activist friends from the nearby mosque, Masjid Al-Islam, they host year-round soup kitchens for the poor and the hungry.

A person like Habibe Husain, founder of Rahma Foundation, has received the Human Relations award of California's Santa Clara County. Her organisation distributes clothes, food and other necessities to the less fortunate residents of Silicon Valley and adjoining areas since 1993.

In cities such as Sacramento, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Tampa Bay and Atlanta, local Muslim doctors provide poor and uninsured residents with free medical care. And through organisations like Habitat for Humanity, Muslims also volunteer their time and skills to build homes for the homeless.

Is our average American aware of these "events"? Perhaps not. There is no requirement that he should be, unless he is a beneficiary himself. After all, we Muslims providing humanitarian services are doing so not to enhance our standing in the



WE'RE AMERICAN AND WE'RE MUSLIMS

MY NAME IS AMINAH KAPADIA, and I'm in a wife, a mom and a student. I'm studying for a Masters degree in education, and I volunteer at our children's school, where I'm also active in the PTA. I was born in Philadelphia, to Puerto Rican parents, and have lived in the United States my entire life. My husband, Zubin, is from India, but has called America home for more than thirty years. He's an attorney and former corporate officer for the U.S. Department of State. Now he spends his time running a consulting firm and coaching our sons' T-ball and soccer teams.

Like many Americans, my husband and I face the challenge of raising our children in an unpredictable world. That's why the basic principles of our religion, like tolerance, justice and devotion to family, are a central part of our lives. As the Prophet Muhammad told us, "The best of you is he who is best to his family. None of you will have faith until he wants for his brother what he wishes for himself."

We believe the security of our nation is dependent upon the strength of our families, and Islam teaches us the values that provide that strength.

WE'RE AMERICAN MUSLIMS



Islam in America: A campaign by Council on American-Islamic Relations

polls, but as a religious calling to help the less fortunate.

But these acts do teach us an important lesson. While it is undeniable that there is a need to educate Americans about Islam and Muslims, perhaps our efforts will go further if more of us engaged in deeds rather than words.

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mosques by about half, and replace them with charitable acts that help the homeless, the needy and the destitute. That will require more effort than writing a check or listening to an Imam expound on the same tired topic. But in the end, it will make us better Muslims.

Perhaps it will even improve our standing in the eyes of our fellow Americans.

The author is a computer scientist from Silicon Valley, California.

QUAZI ABDUL MANNAN

DURING my six months in the US (2005-2006) as a Visiting Fulbright Scholar for some advanced studies and research on interpretative reporting, I had the opportunity to read some recent and re-read some old publications on journalism and the media.

The recent list includes such thought-provoking and mind-blowing titles as "From Watergate to Monicagate: Ten Controversies in Modern Journalism and Media" by Herbert N Foerster. The book's first three chapters: "Monopolistic Control of Journalism," "Public Relations and The News," and "Spies In The Media" are simply fascinating. The contents of the chapter "Spies In The Media" jolted me. This will be dealt with in a separate article on another occasion.

For the purpose of this piece of writing, I am more interested in a very old title, a 1947 publication by the University of Chicago Press. This is a small 139-page volume, titled: "A Free and Responsible Press". This is a report by the commission on the Freedom of the Press and is more popularly known as The Hutchins Commission report on Freedom of the Press in the USA. This is considered a landmark document in the history of American Journalism. Robert M Hutchins, Chancellor, the University of Chicago, was the Chairman of the Commission.

Before I mention the names of the other distinguished members of the Commission, it will be appropriate at this stage to briefly mention how and under what circumstances this landmark commission was constituted. I am tempted to quote the two beginning paragraphs from the foreword of the commission's report by Robert M Hutchins himself. He wrote: "In December 1942, Henry R Luce, of Time Inc. suggested to me an inquiry into the present state future prospects of the Freedom of the Press. A year later, this commission, whose members were selected by me, began its deliberations."

The other paragraph which runs as follows, is more heartening: "The inquiry was financed by grants of \$200,000 from Time Inc. and \$15,000 from Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. The money was disbursed through the University of Chicago. Nether Time Inc., Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. nor the University of Chicago has had any control over or assumed any responsibility for the progress or the conclusion of the inquiry."

The beauty of the whole matter is that a US university chancellor and a group of intellectuals did not set themselves up for the task. The idea, the initiative and resources for the enterprise came from one of America's giant media organisations and media tycoons. Although the commission's inquiry included all agencies of Mass Communications, such as newspapers, radio, books and magazines, motion pictures, etc. its central report was largely concerned with the newspapers.

The Commission spent three years and came out with the warning that only a responsible press can remain free.

To give the readers a feel of the composition of the commission, following are the names of the other members of the commission: Zechariah Chaffe, Jr., Professor of Law, Harvard University; Vice Chairman, John M Clark, Professor of Economics, Columbia University, John Dickinson, Professor of Law, University of Pennsylvania, William E Herking, Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, Harvard University, Harold D Lasswell, Professor of Law, Yale University, Archibald Macleish, formerly Assistant Secretary of State, Charles E Merriam, Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, The University of Chicago, Reinhold Niebuhr, Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion, Union Theological Seminary, Robert Redfield, Professor of Anthropology, The University of Chicago, Beardsley Ruml, Chairman, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Arthur M Schlesinger, Professor of History, Harvard University, George N Shuster, President, Hunter College. Besides, there were four foreign advisors.

The commission held that "only a responsible press can remain free." It went on to emphasise, "morally considered the freedom of the press is conditional -- conditional on the honesty and responsibility of the writer, broadcaster, publisher. A man who lies, intentionally or carelessly, is not morally entitled to claim the protection of the First Amendment."

The fundamental theme of the Hutchins Commission report is that freedom can survive only if media-men inform their audience fully and fairly. Freedom can survive when the media take honest stand on issues and problems that affects the lives of the people.

The media is always a critic of other

institution and individual. It draws its rights from the constitution. But what happens when it overlaps its role in the name of freedom of expression. What happens when it takes the role of the propagandist to promote its own economic and political agenda?

The media in Bangladesh in general is coming under intense public scrutiny. The press in particular is no longer considered the guardian of the public trust. It is no longer of the Fourth Estate; rather a fourth branch either of the government or the opposition. There is now a growing concern about the crumbling credibility of the media. There are now widespread allegations that the media organisations are now cheapening the value of their products. There is a general public distrust of the media. Our media is not forthcoming; it does not have the courage to take a firm stand on issues of national and societal concern.

It is now time that some right-thinking people both in the media and outside should focus on some of the basic questions, problems, issues and concerns of journalism and the media in Bangladesh. There is an urgent need to promote and elevate standards of our journalism. Besides, when the people in the media will be sensitive about their rights and responsibilities, a better balance will be restored.

However, the problems of the media cannot be solved by other agencies, such as the government. It is more a responsibility of sensible and right thinking people in society including in the media itself to make the media accountable and responsible. The fact is, as an institution, the media must also receive its own due share of criticism. My proposal, in the main is to have some kind of an independent forum, a Commission of open criticism and appraisal of the performance of the media in Bangladesh. The Hutchins Commission can serve as a useful guide as to the composition and financing of the Commission.

I am sure many of our respected editors, owners and senior journalists are familiar with the Hutchins Commission Report and its recommendations. As a media researcher, I just took the opportunity to remind them of the task and its urgency. I only hope that my thoughts and ideas will spur some discussions on the subject and will eventually set the tone for the big task.

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