

MASAYUKI INOUE - AMBASSADOR DESIGNATE OF JAPAN TO BANGLADESH

"In any democratic procedure election is very important"

Masayuki Inoue was born in Tokyo in October 1948. He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 1973 after graduating from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, where he mastered in Persian language and culture. A year later he moved to the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture and served in various capacities until being assigned Ambassador of Japan to the People's Republic of Bangladesh last April. He is scheduled to reach Bangladesh on May 15 to take up his new assignment. Prior to his departure for Dhaka he talked to The Daily Star's Monzurul Huq in Tokyo where he reflected on various issues ranging from bilateral relations between Japan and Bangladesh to his expectations as the new Japanese Ambassador.

Monzurul Huq: Excellency, do you speak some Bengali? I am asking you this question right at the beginning because I read in your profile that you have studied Indian and Pakistani languages when you were a student at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

Ambassador Inoue: I do not speak much Bengali. The main language that I have learned at the university was Persian. I understand there are many Persian words in your language. For example, your numbering probably follows the Persian pattern. One word that I recall right now is slowly, which in Bengali you say "aste, aste." I think this word has its origin in Persian and they pronounce it "ahaste, ahaste." I am sure you will pick up Bengali language very quickly once you take over your new assignment. Do you have any plan to learn the language while serving in Bangladesh?

In fact my wife and I myself have already started learning Bengali with Professor Kyoko Niwa, who is one of the leading experts in Japan of Bengali language and literature.

You have a rich and unique cultural heritage. I am confident as ambassador of Japan I would be able to show our due respect to your culture and your language. I know your language is very rich with Rabindranath Tagore being the first Nobel Prize winner in Asia. As Asian it is our pride that Tagore was the first Asian Nobel laureate. When I worked at the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, I was once in charge of the science department there and I often visited Sweden where we talked about the Nobel award. Tagore's name as Asia's first Nobel laureate was frequently mentioned in such meetings and I could feel how close he is

to us also. **Have you been to Bangladesh before?**

No, unfortunately not. I worked for the international affairs department of the ministry and visited many countries. I was also at one time Secretary General of the Japanese National Commission for UNESCO. In such capacities I often visited Bangkok. I also had been to many European and Middle Eastern countries. But somehow it never happened for me to be in Bangladesh. But I am now very much looking forward to work in your country to serve for the friendship between two countries and between the two people.

How do you see Bangladesh? What is your perception of the country?

Well I think, first, the country has a very long history, and as I have learned, you feel proud of your culture and your language. But of course I have also heard about the floods and cyclones that sometime hit and cause extensive damages. Moreover, with a population of 140 million, Bangladesh is indeed a very big country. After learning from Professor Niwa and other people, I now know for sure that it is a very interesting country and I am now looking forward to serve there. **Bangladesh has always been a close ally of Japan and the two countries are enjoying cordial relationship right from the days of our independence. How do you intend to expand further this relationship of understanding? Is there any specific field that you intend to focus on?**

I think there are many ways to develop further this relationship of cooperation and understanding between Japan and Bangladesh. Official Development Assistance

(ODA) and loans are important aspects of our relations to Bangladesh. We definitely have to continue and expand this tie.

Another important side, of course, is direct investment from Japanese private sector, which we have to increase. This is very important, because, as you might know that our government is going through financial difficulties. So, we have to utilize the capacity and power of the private sector. This is the second important thing that I have to look at.

And the third is closely related to my professional background. There are 1,500 students at various Japanese universities from Bangladesh. The number of students from Bangladesh has been increasing. I think this human bondage is quite important too. Bangladeshi students are studying in engineering, technology, art, culture and various other fields. I think we can expand further this relationship.

So, as I said, ODA, private investment, and relations in education, culture, science and technology and human resource development of your country are the main aspects that I intend to emphasize on.

There are some criticisms about students from Bangladesh, particularly on their staying back in Japan on completion of study. Some critics tend to call it sort of a brain drain, as scholarships are given so that the recipients can utilize the expertise and learning acquired in Japan back at home and make contribution to their respective societies. How do you intend to address this problem?

Yes, I heard of this concern from other developing countries as well. But I do not think this is a direct brain drain. For example, with your 140

million populations, a few students working in Japan would not have that much adverse impact on the country. Of course we expect that all students who study in Japan go back to their countries to serve for the development of those societies. But those who are staying back, I think some day in the future they too would return home and will be able to contribute to the society in a much better way. So, as I told you, what you in Bengali say "aste, aste" -- that might be the right approach to look at the issue. This is probably also the spirit of human resource development education.

ODA is the main pillar of our relationship with Japan. There are some criticisms that official assistance not always reaches the target population for whom the aid is given, which is the poor and vulnerable. Do you have any intention to focus on addressing such criticism?

I think you have asked a very important question. Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget comes from our taxpayers. As a result, my government should be accountable to our taxpayers. In that context I think the continuous review of ODA to any country, not only Bangladesh, is very important. There has been stronger voice these days from our parliamentarians as well as various sectors of the society that ODA must contribute to the development, must reach to the people and must help the advancement of recipient countries.

Do you have any specific idea, how as ambassador of Japan you would like to ensure that this happens?

We have various ODA projects in Bangladesh, one of which is to contribute for the development of infrastructure like bridges and

highways. There are also projects for rural development, which is also very important. Educational development is another crucial field and I want to continue working on all those sectors. We also have young volunteers working at grass-root level development projects. This type of ODA is also very important.

In some cases you are working with NGOs as well, isn't it?

Yes, of course. One such NGO is Shapla Neer, which is working at grass-root level in Bangladesh for more than thirty years now. In fact, recently at a farewell party at my ministry I presented my colleagues with small token of gifts that I have purchased from Shapla Neer. These were what you called Nakshi Katha, and my colleagues; particularly female colleagues liked the gift very much. Shapla Neer is contributing for the improvement of your people for more than thirty years now through this kind of activities as well as their direct involvement at the field level.

Do you have any plan to expand such activities with Bangladeshi NGOs?

I have heard that in your country NGOs are playing a very important role in development. I did not have the opportunity to meet various people of your country, but on arrival I would like to meet NGO representatives of your country as well and try to explore the possibility of expanding the cooperative approach.

You are assuming the ambassadorial post at a time considered crucial for Bangladesh. The country is going to have general election by January 2007 and politics in Bangladesh is characterized by politics of confrontation. Election time, as a result, is going to be tough time for the country. How Japan intends to keep a watchful eye over the incidents there? And how do you think Japan can help Bangladesh organize a free and fair election?

In your last two elections Japan helped Bangladesh by sending election monitors. I am not sure yet what is the exact situation now. I think we need to exchange opinion



with your government. But in any case, I think in any democratic procedure election is very important as this is how people express and reflect their political wish on the governance of the country. So, I sincerely hope that the election will take place safely and smoothly, and people's wish will duly be reflected in election results.

Is there anything that Bangladesh can learn from the democratic tradition of Japan?

I think you are familiar with our history. There are various factors that have been the driving force behind our development in last sixty years. One is that, in Japan we do not have any natural resources. What we instead have is the human resource. Therefore, we have firm commitment to our education, to our scientific and technological advancement. These two have always been two important goals of our government. This is one aspect of looking at and learning from

Japan. Your country with the population of 140 million has a great potential.

Another aspect is the respect for human rights. This is exactly what Japan could achieve in last sixty years. Before the World War II Japanese society was more or less divided into two groups. At the one end were big landowners and on the other were landless farmers who suffered much. But during the post war reform the situation was addressed and farmers became landowners. The reform had an egalitarian perspective, which is very important for any democratic society.

Also I think local development and distribution of power is another aspect from which many things can be learned. Of course in Japan today there are many aspects of the government that still are centralized. But power has been gradually shifted to the local governments. In addition, moral and morale of the

people in a democratic society is also another crucial aspect.

Finally, I would like to ask you what your expectation in Bangladesh would be. Is there any specific aim or target that you have set for yourself?

Well, I think I have already touched on this issue. Anyway, when I went to meet the Emperor, he told me to reinforce the friendship between Japan and Bangladesh and between the people of two countries. I think I shall try to do my best to respond to these wishes of our Emperor.

In search of knowledge idols

It is perhaps imperative to consider it from a different angle as well. Have we pondered why the once reputed "zilla schools" in the erstwhile district towns have virtually withered from the scene? Why scores of reputed Bengali-medium schools across smaller mufassil towns have embraced a similar fate? These are the schools that produced generations of political leadership, social workers, and civil servants over the decades. A Who's Who of contemporary Bangladesh would eminently testify to this. More importantly, on the strength of having these schools at grassroots, where the qualitative difference between schooling in urban and suburban or rural areas was not significant, most first generation youth could make the leap to the national scene.

M RIAZ HAMIDULLAH

RECENT times have seen a good deal of interest in our part of the world in searching for young talents. For quite some years, many in Bangladesh have talked about the need for creating openings for young talent. Recent enthusiasm over the "Close-up One" talent search, I suppose, does merit recognition in that respect. Bengal Foundation's Bengal Bikash (search of musical talents) and BTB's decade-old Natun Kuri program across the country are noteworthy as well.

Thanks to a burgeoning electronic media, we now have some young talents in music and entertainment arena. Such endeavours have also led to positive effects on another score: for instance, many urban Bangladeshi youth who might have surfed foreign media channels of competing interest, indeed did find "Close-up One" contest as one of equal, if not greater, variety and value. Of the long-term intangible effects, a young boy or girl irrespective of his/her background can now dream of coming to the forefront.

Whether we call the young boys and girls identified in the process "idols" or anything else should therefore be of trivial interest. Even if a sense of commercial motive is traced in the organizers' spearheading a culture of creating idols, one can indeed locate a much more organized effort in these enterprises. Building on the organizational strengths of those endeavours, one can perhaps articulate an alternative model, more cerebral in content and form.

But, why search for a "cerebral idol"? The premise is set keeping our education system in view, which has witnessed much experimentation and intervention in independent Bangladesh era. This is despite the progress we have made over the past three decades -- in relative and absolute terms -- in universalizing basic education.

While enrollment has increased significantly, education quality at primary and secondary levels, especially beyond the confines of the metropolises, has regressed. A substantial body of analyses on education quality demonstrates

this. Many of the urbanites who maintain contact with their ancestral roots or visit villages have seen traces of the decline in the education sector.

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These are the schools that produced generations of political leadership, social workers, and civil servants over the decades. A Who's Who of contemporary Bangladesh would eminently testify to this. More importantly, on the strength of having these schools at grassroots, where the qualitative difference between schooling in urban and suburban or rural areas was not significant, most first generation youth could make the leap to the national scene.

The state of affairs in schools like Armanitola School, Collegiate School and many more in old Dhaka and across former old district towns is a sad commentary. The more contemporary ones like West End School, Government Laboratory High School have also fallen off the track, compared to their original time.

For decades, these schools remained model schools for hundreds of other schools across Bangladesh. It would not be an over-statement to say that these institutions also demonstrated the state and strength of the vernacular language-based and local content-rich education at a given point in time. Same applies to once-reputed higher secondary institutions, e.g. Ananda Mahan College, B L College, B M College, Victoria College, etc.

Such are the institutions which form the back-bone for vast majority of Bangladeshi children even today. It is thus nothing less than an enigma to me and millions of other products of that mainstream schooling that how the State and civil society remain 'indifferent' to the virtual withering of our mainstream education.

Urban Bangladesh has however seen a sort of market correction to this vacuum in the growth of kindergartens and "English-medium schools" over the past decade or so. But, no society would expect a market correction in provisioning a public good (because of its very nature) as "education" by allowing private actors an uncontrolled play.

In other words, a Bangladeshi would not expect these "English-medium schools" to fill the void for the millions of Bangladeshi children. Clearly, the more delay we make in improving the quality of mainstream education, the greater is the likelihood of social conflict between the products of the mainstream and the minority English-medium schools.

Strikingly, our education system regressed at a time when elements of globalization made deeper inroads into Bangladesh. It is paradoxical that when innovative education tools, technologies and knowledge/information are much more available and accessible, the gap between the urban and rural schools keeps widening. Eventual outcome is progression towards an inevitable mufassil town - major metropolis imbalance. Same should hold true for public and private education institutions within the metropolises.

Some may argue that before we embark on much larger scheme of reviving the once-reputed-institutions, let us first begin with hunting the talents at the grassroots. But, if we expect that the talents will be able to sustain themselves while the crucial elements -- be that school or a much larger local surrounding -- lag far behind, then that is a wrong premise to start with. Experience abounds that once a talent is recognized, he or she needs to have a competitive or appreciative environment to further his or her potential. The young people need peers of equal or near-equal quality to interact and further hone their skills.

Similar arguments surfaced when Jawaharlal Nehru argued for establishment of the Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institute of Science as centres of excellence in the 1950s in independent India. He further reasoned that a higher allocation of resources

to these institutions should not be seen through the prism of excellence-equity mismatch. The argument put forward by his opponents that this was an elitist approach, he countered, was missing the point that the talents need to be groomed under one roof for greater common good. India's economic progress since then and contribution of the products of these institutions therein indeed speak for Nehru's foresight.

Many novel initiatives could be considered to break a near impasse in our schools. 'Bangladesh Mathematics Olympiad', being organized for the past few years, is one innovative intervention. It reminded me of "mental mathematics" that my generation used to have at the primary schools. Different forums are organizing thematic essay or debate competitions from time to time as well.

Let us however consider a different two-tiered proposition: a much broader competition in each district to identify young boys and girls prolific in vernacular language who demonstrate command over mathematical reasoning and other forms of reasoning ability. Ability in one form should not be mutually exclusive of the other. The ultimate purpose is to recognize the talented young people, at a much younger age group i.e. 812 years, on the basis of their ingenuity of thought process.

Once the talents are recognized, the obvious next step should be to let them further sharpen their skills in a continuing process. For that, we need to focus on at least one school in each district, to start with, as a centre of excellence. Providing a quality school in the locality is perhaps the first, but critical, form of support to those talented youth. They also need to be supported by making the community aware of the whole proposition of nurturing talents, hiring committed and enlightened teachers, building libraries in the locality. All these elements ultimately complement one another.

One illustration should be relevant. The Total Literacy Movement (TLM) launched in Northern Bangladesh district of Lalmonirhat in 1995 demonstrated that the making a person literate cannot be a one-off event. Following months of mass mobilization involving the civil administration and civil society, the district attained 100% adult literacy. Compared to many such initiatives, in various respects, the initiative was substantially innovative and suited to local context.

However, once the celebrations were over, in couple of months, a larger challenge surfaced: the neoliterates started demanding a continuous supply of reading materials to quench their thirst for reading! This was a sustainable solution was

found by helping the communities establish small-scale community libraries.

While we embark on strengthening and reviving the schools, it is important to approach the whole subject with an open mind. If innovative measures are to be tested, let us accept those. Let us consider the extent of innovation that India, for example, has embarked upon. Last year, New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) realized that the hundreds of schools that they were running were not up to a satisfactory level.

In spite of having its in-house assessment, NDMC decided to have an unbiased, independent and reliable view of all aspects schools' performance. There were however questions over NDMC's collaboration with an NGO in school affairs. But, NDMC explained that their objective was to conduct school inspection, rather to bring out potential of the schools.

Accordingly, NDMC formed a partnership with a local NGO Ritinjali and asked the NGO to conduct an appraisal program "Avolokan." Last month, Ritinjali submitted the report of the first phase of Avolokan to NDMC which has underlined scopes to ensure greater accountability and transparency in schools.

If we call these initiatives out-of-the-box, let these be. Starting from curriculum improvement, teachers quality, physical infrastructure to ultimately creating a learning-friendly environment in schools, be it is MPO-funded or not, there are wide areas where such interventions are needed.

If we are sincere in reviving the true spirit of scholarship, it has to be a spirited compact between all the stakeholders: the local communities, local libraries, schools at the micro level, and the civil society and the state at the macro level.

Talents need to be recognized and nurtured in a continuous process. Little matters whether we label our toddler or young talent "Idol," "Little Hero," or "Role Model." What matters is our resolve to recognize scholarship and collectively support them in their efforts. Such hero worship is the need of the hour.

The writer is a member of Bangladesh Civil Service. Views expressed are his own.

New "New Labour"



STRYKER MCGUIRE

TONY Blair's press aide, Alistair Campbell, scribbled four words on a piece of paper: "New Labour, New Britain." It was September 1994, and Blair's inner circle had gathered to map out the final steps in their takeover of the Labour Party he had led for only two months. At the time, some Blairites worried that Campbell's in-your-face break with the past would spark a revolt among the traditional party faithful. But no. When the slogan was rolled out at the party's annual conference a few days later, no rebellion materialized -- and Labour would never be the same again.

It turned out to be the most successful political makeover in modern British history. With Blair at the helm, the transformed Labour Party -- business-friendly, lightened of its socialist baggage -- went on to crush the Conservatives in 1997 and won again in 2001 and 2005. But with this month's local elections, the wheels came off Blair's bandwagon. His party lost more than 250 council seats across England, mostly to the resurgent Conservatives. Labour's 26 percent share of the overall vote ranked a pitiful third behind the Tories' 40 percent and the Liberal Democrats' 27 percent. It was Labour's worst electoral debacle since the Thatcher years, and raised serious questions even among some loyalists about whether the man responsible for New Labour was now more of a threat than a blessing to his party.

Despite approval ratings that have sunk to Bushian levels (as low as 31 percent before the vote), Blair certainly doesn't seem to think so. The day after the election, the prime minister reshuffled his cabinet. Home Secretary Charles Clarke was ousted, victim of a scandal involving the release of immigrant criminals. John Prescott's responsibilities as deputy prime minister

were curtailed, partly the result of a flap over his sexual peccadilloes. Less than 100 percent behind Blair on Iraq and a critic of American saber-rattling over Iran, Foreign Minister Jack Straw was replaced by Margaret Beckett, although she's already being criticized for her lack of foreign-policy experience in an era of international upheaval.

None of this amounts to a real changing of the guard. On the contrary, the new roster, dominated by Blair stalwarts, looks like a desperate bid by the prime minister to hang on to his job -- and therefore seems certain to deepen splits in the party at a time when the Tories, impotent for so long, are gathering strength once more. His elevation of two acolytes in particular -- the bruising Scot John Reid to the Home Office and the modernizing former union boss Alan Johnson to the Education Department -- puts them in position to challenge Blair's designated successor, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown.

The prime minister has said he will not serve a fourth term, and the dominant assumption in British political circles is that he plans to hand over power to Brown in a year or so. Yet although a few Brownites got ministerial jobs last week, the cabinet looks less like the "transition cabinet" that Brown allies had hoped for and more like a "getting a grip" cabinet, as a source close to Blair described it to Newsweek. The same source scoffed at the notion that Brown will be content to wait his turn patiently after such an embarrassing loss: "Yeah, he'd like to wait until tomorrow -- maybe until Monday."

Other splits are emerging as well. One unmistakable message of the election was that New Labour under Blair is beginning to look old and stale, even frail. Some of its members, never comfortable with the prime minister's moves from left to right to begin with, are up in arms. In Stoke-on-Trent last week, Labour

City Councillman Mick Salih lost the seat he had held for 13 years. "I shan't be renewing my membership and that's a fact," he said. "This is not the Labour Party I joined all them years ago. It's the Tory Party in disguise."

That remains a minority view within the party. For all their bickering, the up-and-coming Blairites and Brownites who are Labour's next generation are all modernizers, "not back-to-the-future types," as YouGov polling company chairman Peter Kellner puts it. And among the handful of thirty- and fortysomething M.P.s who are rated as credible future contenders for the party leadership, "there's nobody who's not New Labour," says Alastair Campbell, who left 10 Downing Street in 2003.

But for Brown allies, that lends even more force to their argument that what the party needs is a "renewal" -- a code word that the cagey chancellor is using more and more. Better to revitalize the party's image with a change in leadership now, they argue, before more political missteps fuel some serious ideological infighting. "I think we have to be more ambitious," says Labour M.P. Graham Allen. "We've been a safe pair of hands. But there's a feeling of disappointment that our governance was so risk-averse (after the 1997 landslide). I'm keen that we go further under Brown."

Blair doesn't seem to agree that to save Labour he needs to give it up. But if his unpopularity continues to taint the party, calls for him to do so will only grow louder.

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