

FOCUS

Transit: The Politics of an Economic Issue

Are We Behaving Rationally?

by R Karim Khondker

With revolutionary development in information and communications technology the world becomes closer everyday, the interdependence among nations in all spheres of life is also on the rise in every other region of the world except ours in the subcontinent. Our mind set, shaped by largely our sad history seems to be one of the major stumbling blocks. Every attempt to remove such blocks is sabotaged by dark forces of backwardness and retrogression.

THE Government of Bangladesh has decided to allow India to "tranship" goods to its seven eastern states through Bangladesh using Bangladeshi transports. According to the government, the terms and modalities are yet to be determined by "experts" of both the countries. This has let loose an unhealthy commotion and misgivings in some quarters and also stirred up some public debate. Public debate on any national and social issue is always healthy. But the issue, though mainly an economic one, is turning out to be more political and appears to have headed to a wrong direction, *ab initio*. Major political parties and some vested interests in the social and political arena have started digging old dirt in an apparent attempt to force the issue to fade away by nurturing seeds of panic.

Along with these forces labelled as "anti-Indian", some well known intellectuals have joined hands in "discrediting" the present government's tentative decision of approving transhipment of Indian goods through Bangladesh — as a preliminary step to an ostensibly full-blown transit privilege. Even the association of teachers of Dhaka University recently issued a statement opposing the government decision. From such a supposed-to-be enlightened body, the promulgation seems to be politically motivated or at best, not-so-thoughtful considering all factors in the context. Mr. Saifur Rahman, a former finance minister was perhaps the only opposition leader who contributed a substantive critique by bringing up some serious economic as well as otherwise important questions as they relate to Bangladesh's interest, which deserve to be addressed metaculously.

The central points of the debate should be economic, and not political ones. Unfortunately the issue does become a political football when the leader of the largest opposition party announces, "We'll rather give our lives than corridor to India." One must note the sky difference that exists between "transhipment" (or transit for that matter) and a "corridor".

Besides, "transit" generally means transportation of goods of one country to another, through the territory of a third country. But the situation is different here in that, we are discussing the possibility of goods of one country (India) to be shipped to a different region of the same country through a second country (Bangladesh). However, it seems to be only a matter of time before a "Jihad" is declared by leaders of some forces in the opposition.

Nonetheless, before we go to analyse the relevant issues, statements, declarations, presentations, etc., we must not lose sight of the timid, vacillat-

SPEAKERS in the seminar on the "Role of Universities in Higher Education and Research in the 21st Century's Bangladesh" organised by the Federation of Bangladesh University Teachers' Association held recently at BUET stressed the need for more allocation of fund for research activities and higher education in the country so that the future generation could meet the challenge of the next millennium. Chaired by Professor Jasim Uddin Ahmed, the seminar was addressed by guest and Jahangirnagar University Vice-Chancellor Professor Alaudin Ahmed as the guest of honour.

There is no denying the fact that education in the country is now in a confused and peculiar state. Tracing back the decadent state of education, the keynote speaker in the seminar Prof Iqbal Mahmud, ex-VC, BUET asserted that all over the world it was taken for certain that educational achievement and economic success are closely linked. Sure enough, the struggle to raise a nation's standard is fought first and foremost in the classroom. What has established this idea more so in people's minds is a recent, and to many a rather alarming, phenomenon: the new intensity of global economic rivalry. At the present moment the idea of international competition among nations manifest in educational method and systems has been strikingly evident. The keynote speaker stressed the fact that on the threshold of the new millennium the key to economic progress is deeply rooted in the nations' advancement in scientific learning, skill in the application of technical knowledge and a free and unfettered atmosphere for the growth of creative skills.

Speaking about the success of some emerging economies in the Asian region, the keynote speaker asserted that the most successful are the ones that have educated most of their workers up to and in many cases beyond levels typically

achieved in the west. Undeniably true, the new jobs in tomorrow's industries, in manufacturing and services alike will call for more than button pressing automation. They will require workers that are literate, numerate and trainable — in word educated. Speaking about the spectacular success of some Asian countries, now known as "Asian Tigers" the keynote speaker made this point abundantly clear that the investments they made in education, i.e. in schools, colleges and universities paid off enormously. Undeniably true, while in some countries international comparisons are already being used as a catalyst for educational reform, and an intense competition to achieve economic success, we have shown appalling apathy towards even achieving at least a meaningful standard.

For example the poor performance of Swedish children in Maths in the mid 1980s led to the setting up of a new programme of inservice training for teachers. Sweden has since pulled itself up above the international average having scored 120, decidedly the topmost position in the table of nations with Bangladesh coming to 21st position from the top with a score of 110 superseding Pakistan with score of 98.

Economists are now convinced that higher investment in education coupled with the initiative to develop human resources has helped South Korea reach the top. Incidentally, one might recall that starting 1998 Koreans have been banned to hire private teachers or "Kwawoo" in subjects other than arts and music for all students below university level. Seoul, it is learnt, wants to curb excessive spending on tutors and reduce a burgeoning, mostly untaxed service industries dominated by

foreigners. More important, it seeks to promote egalitarianism among students by disallowing parents a chance to buy their children a superior education. The authorities' move is not entirely without justification. In the year 1996 Koreans, it is learnt spent \$ 25 billion or fully 150 per cent of the government's education budget on kwawoo. The cost to individual families is staggering.

A household typically spends \$ 1900 a year on tutoring for a single secondary school student and \$ 1500 on a child in primary school. Many families are said to spend up to half their income on private teachers. A recent opinion poll in Korea found support among nearly half of the respondents for a complete ban on the practice. Private tuition or coaching centre-based education in the country is chipping away at the edifice of the education system and destroying merit and growth of intelligence of the students. Rather, government should work on improving the nation's quality of education as well as access to it. If the government can manage to do so, then the demand for private tutors will naturally decline. The government must provide in public education what parents are obliged to buy privately. Since the last one decade, higher education systems in the country is tottering on the edge.

The problems are two-faced: lack of resources and declining

quality. Some of the seats of higher learning have fought the apathy by their own effort. But situation has now reached a critical position: these institutions have been pushed to the ropes by a severe resource crunch that has jolted the universities in the country. Quality has suffered, laboratories have become antiquated and libraries have cut down on subscriptions. Speaking about BUET, Vice-Chancellor Professor Nooruddin Ahmed (chief guest at the seminar) mentioned that an effort to bring the different laboratories in the BUET in line with the advanced universities of the world would need at least 100 crore taka. But subsidies from the government are being cut resulting in deterioration of the quality. This is a move that most feel would be a knock-out blow for the system.

Mentionably, South Korea and Ghana had the same GDP in the 1960s, while South Korea's GDP grew eight fold by 1998. Ghana remained where it was and the main reason for such decline is its poor competitiveness. Bangladesh now ranks lowest in all sectors. Leaving aside the education sector, even in sectors of textiles, jute, steel and manufacturing industries with its emphasis on labour intensive production methods, Bangladesh is rapidly losing its edge.

Speakers at the seminar noted with grim shock and concern that in the country higher

education has been classified as "non-merit goods/services". This was done, possibly keeping two things in mind: the fact that subsidies are not benefiting the target population, implying the fact that most students going to universities fall from the middle and upper-middle classes, and that the social rate of return in this sector is low, meaning that the higher education really benefits the individual more than society. So the question of allowing subsidy in this sector is abysmally low.

This must be a very short sighted decision. Speaking about the rate of return, one might naturally ask what is the rate of return in allowing subsidies to the Jute and Textile sector that remain perpetually sick. Speakers expressed the view that in an era of liberalisation, when the country needs trained manpower, besides a cutting edge on research and development, curtailing funds to this sector would be akin to following a suicidal path. It is therefore high time that a detailed study was done to work out what constitutes social return and what constitutes private return in higher education.

BUET Vice-Chancellor added, "It is well-known that universities in the country especially in the public sector are engaged in a battle of contending dooms: mediocrity, a terrifying vacuum of quality, antiquated laboratories, and teaching methods,

migration of teachers and last of all an appalling lack of interest exhibited by the students in pursuing higher education." The VC added that coaching centre-based education has proliferated in the country dishing out education in capsule form. Students gathering knowledge from photocopies of selected topics without going through the text books are getting intellectually less capable to tackle problems and challenges of the day. On the other hand, aware of the bleak future that awaits them in employment opportunities, most of the students studying in leading universities have switched over to private tuition as occupation that fetch them a handsome income, more than they could earn after getting a degree.

But earning while learning is a dangerous intoxication and that only encourages a student to prolong his stay in the university to the utter detriment of the educational atmosphere.

Universities run by subsidies from the UGC with no capacity to generate their own resources are facing a severe deterioration in quality because they have utterly failed to equip the laboratories, provide educational inputs most needed in this era of fast progress and innovation. The subsidy universities get from the UGC is mostly spent on salaries of teachers, officers and other staff with very little left for research or creating facilities for educa-

tionship with Bangladesh. Fair or not, this kind of reaction from the Indian government was not unexpected in the light of the past history of the sub-continent and the fact that India was a partner in our independence war.

The major source of the lack of trust (about everything relating to India) on the part of some influential members of the "civil society" has little to do with what India does or does not vis-à-vis Bangladesh, *per se*. It is the built-in prejudice, the roots of which have penetrated too deep in our psyche. According to local newspapers, one opposition leader concluded that granting transit to India would bring epidemic of AIDS to Bangladesh through contact with Indian transport workers, many of whom carry the germs. That sounds too insulting and heart-breaking, and it only manifests one's malice, if anything.

The Government of Bangladesh has not been democratic and transparent in dealing with the issue:

The allegation is perhaps partly correct. Given the importance and sensitivity of the issue the 'preliminary' decision of the government, as hasty as it was, came as a shock to many. Undeniably the government did not complete the ground work before taking such a monumental decision. A national debate both within and outside of the parliament should have preceded even an exploratory and conditional approval of the issue on the part of the Cabinet. An elaborate presentation about the long term political and economic implications of granting the privilege to our neighbour who surrounds us on all sides but one, could have prepared the public for acquiescence, at a minimum. No wonder that even before any formal pronouncement, the decision became a tool for an assault upon the government by the opposition alliance'.

Third, those who opine that "India cannot be trusted" should be reminded about 1971 when nearly 10 million of us took refuge — the only refuge we could find to save our lives. Certainly we "trusted" India then. We received help when we needed help. Of course, the likely answer would be that India had a geopolitical interest in it. Sure it did. But how about the broad masses of India? Can we not remember the social-economic sacrifice made by the people of India, especially the residents of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam? It seems that we have a serious case of *lapsus memoriae* may be a lapse of convenience. However, to see it from another angle, those who make such statements may be 'correct' from their own perspectives. Many of them had not "trusted" India then, nor do they now, and never will. It is no secret that the sea-changes in the nature and policy of our government following the August 1975 coup d'état could be cited as *raison de plus* to turn India off in respect of its rela-

tionship with Bangladesh. Fair or not, this kind of reaction from the Indian government was not unexpected in the light of the past history of the sub-continent and the fact that India was a partner in our independence war.

Having said all of the above let us ask the question, even if the government had done everything in the ways as have been indicated above, would that have satisfied the opposition and would the transhipment decision have sailed thru smoothly? Of course not. Our principal opposition party is there to oppose and oppose only.

Some important economic issues at stake:

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Nonetheless, these along with other acts of non-cooperation and apathy on the part of India vis-à-vis Bangladesh (and its other neighbours) should be judged with reference to the context. Playing the "India card", that is ejecting a dose of venom toward India whenever it becomes necessary to gain some cheap popularity, has been a favourite weapon of the politicians of all major parties in Bangladesh. Even Awami League, during its 1996 election campaign allegedly played the "card" occasionally to prove its India-neutral credential. All relationships — individual, national or international — are like two-way streets. It may be recalled, our past governments in the post-1975 era were anything but India-friendly, and often showed belligerent attitude toward India, no matter what they would have to say in public.

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tionally improvement. The stark fact is that when it comes to buying, say, MIGs, cost is no object and logic goes out the window. But when it comes to making investments in education and research or even saving infants' lives, penury is the rule. Why the governments in the country right from 1975 has been lavishing millions annually on military spending, deemed not so worthy and useful in the present context?

The more appropriate question is why governments in all these years have been so short-sighted about investing in education especially higher education and research. For a generation public spending has tilted towards the needs of the affluent who are far away from the next generation. This is a rather shocking tendency to spend frivolously to-day rather than investing sensibly for tomorrow. Proposals to enhance allocation for universities for raising educational standards meet opposition because they would be expensive and inconvenient for the powers that be. Moreover in our country planners and administrators tend to forget the growing consensus that education is the key to getting rich for countries as well as individuals. It is now widely believed that one of the main reasons why "Tiger economies" like Singapore and South Korea have grown so quickly is that their governments had made determined and successful efforts to raise educational standards. That means governments everywhere have woken up to the full economic significance of education just as they are making desperate attempts to rein in public spending.

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Universities run by subsidies from the UGC with no capacity to generate their own resources are facing a severe deterioration in quality because they have utterly failed to equip the laboratories, provide educational inputs most needed in this era of fast progress and innovation. The subsidy universities get from the UGC is mostly spent on salaries of teachers, officers and other staff with very little left for research or creating facilities for education.

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Higher Education and Research: Tottering on the Edge

by Md. Asadullah Khan

Private universities that have almost sprung up like mushroom have been collecting 2 to 3 lakh taka per student annually without protest from the guardians or students even when they have no equipped laboratories, no libraries and not even a suitable environment for catering education. But for public universities when it comes to hiking tuition fees or any other charges, it becomes a heated political issue with angry protests and rampaging of the campus leading to closure of the universities

foreigners. More important, it seeks to promote egalitarianism among students by disallowing parents a chance to buy their children a superior education. The authorities' move is not entirely without justification. In the year 1996 Koreans, it is learnt spent \$ 25 billion or fully 150 per cent of the government's education budget on kwawoo. The cost to individual families is staggering.

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