

## Tata coming in a big way

### *It must be a win-win deal*

WE are heartened by the green light the Board of Investment (BOI) has given, on behalf of Government of Bangladesh (GOB), to the Indian giant private sector conglomerate Tata's investment proposals worth \$2 billion for power, steel and fertiliser plants in Bangladesh. The big move is coming in the infrastructure building sector where the need for investment is the greatest. Aside from the big size of the investment and the right areas it is going to be made in, there is a certain qualitative aspect to the offer beamed by Tata's established reputation in setting up strategic industries.

One can read more positive signs, a plenty of them, into the prospective event. First of all, it is a potential path-breaker in garnering massive doses of private investment for Bangladesh. Tata's initiative could enhance confidence in the private sector of not only India but also that of other countries to funnel more FDI into Bangladesh. That way it would have a multiplier effect.

Also, it is inspiring to note that Tata's new roadmap for investment destinations include Bangladesh among other countries such as South Korea, Singapore and South Africa.

Such a big investment by the prestigious Tata Group in Bangladesh will hopefully contribute its mite in bringing about equitable trade between the two neighbouring countries in whatever way possible. The trade balance is currently hugely tilted towards India. At least, the Tata initiative promises to generate some buy-back arrangements in India.

In the long run, stronger bilateral economic relations are destined to impact most positively on Indo-Bangla relations.

We have a word of caution, though. In our highly enthusiastic welcome to Tata's investment package, we must bear in mind the fact that the massive investment plan will hit the ground contingent upon a guarantee given to the Indian corporate giant for continued supply of gas at concessional price for 20 years to Tata. Let's not forget, a wrong and unrealistic commitment made in the KAFCO deal had placed a burden on the nation it was hard put to carry. So, in negotiating gas pricing and supply arrangements with Tata, we need to keep the national interest upper most in mind while allowing for the profitability that Tata must enjoy as an incentive to be making the investment up front. There need not be any conflict of interests.

The goal ought to be a win-win deal for both sides. Only then the investment will bloom into many flowers.

## Traffic nightmare

*Do something about it, please!*

TRAFFIC jams in the city have assumed unbearable proportions, forcing commuters to lose valuable time and energy. Most of the intersections have become a nightmare for the people in desperate need for reaching their destinations on time. The tail of the queue of vehicles is getting longer and longer demanding stoic patience on the part of otherwise impatient road users. What used to be a half hour journey has now become one-and-a-half hour long endurance test. While the situation is worsening, the traffic authorities' capacity to manage shrinks in direct proportion.

The economic implications are grave as precious man hours are lost on the road.

According to the traffic department statistics, 67 new vehicles are added on an average to the existing fleet every day. There are 20 rail crossings in the city, which slow down the pace of movement. Finally, lack of coordination among the government agencies leads to almost round-the-year digging and re-digging of roads by the utility service providers which tend to obstruct traffic. People have cried hoarse straining their vocal chord on these but to little avail.

The traffic authorities are clamping down on unlicensed rickshaws and old motorised vehicles. Things appear to be moving on the right track. But predictably they will run out of steam once the traffic week ends.

What is needed is a sound, doable action plan. Not all the problems can be solved overnight as vast structural improvement is needed in certain cases. But it is not clear why the traffic department cannot keep the old and dilapidated vehicles off the roads? Somehow regulatory measures announced with great fanfare are compromised or abandoned half way through. This is an issue that calls for government's immediate attention.

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

RECENT events around us will surely compel concerned citizens to ask whether our hard-earned freedom's foundation will last. The question is: are we going down? The area of concern is the internal stability of our country in the background of a scenario marked by the highest level of general political violence that includes demonstrations, clashes, internal armed attacks, and attempts at assassinations. The concern assumes significance on account of the economic floundering, political unrest, constitutional erosion, and moral degradation in public life. We may take comfort in the fact that the unrest is worldwide, but it would be unwise to deny or ignore that we have a sizable problem at hand.

The resilience of democratic polity varies from place to place and the timing of political breakdown depends upon the strength of political institutions. Our political institutions have not, unfortunately, acquired sufficient durability through either experience or tradition. This is a sad reality with which we have to grapple. We have an economy that cannot meet the rising expectations of the people along with fragile institutions and a constitution that is bent by the whims of the ruling party.

### Cracks in the institutions

Our economic hardships would have been less unbearable if our basic freedoms were not eroded, the strength of our public life not sapped, and our public life not degraded. We have subordinated the individual to the state so extensively that, barring some honourable exceptions, the nation is now made up of one-dimensional men. We do not realise that the dwarfing of the individual by the state will only help in the mushrooming of spineless characters who, needless to emphasise, will not produce anything of substance. We have deval-

ued the judiciary, as we have devalued every other important institution. We have not defended our judges against political pressures and threats, and we have also not insisted upon integrity and impartiality in judicial appointments. At the same time, we have permitted the executive to supersede judges on not very cogent grounds. The causes of our malaise are moral, political, and constitutional, and they have to be recognised as such.

### Lawlessness and the cost

We are continuing to bear the increasing cost of crime control and lawlessness. Our resources are limited. We do not have adequate money for universal primary educa-

tion, basic health cover, adequate water supply, and sanitation. Our productive base is not expanding. We are caught in a vicious cycle. Because of increasing lawlessness, investment in desired quantum is not coming from foreign or local sources, and when investment is not taking place, unemployment is bound to increase, giving rise to further lawlessness. We are suffering from acute myopia. We do not have the capacity to see the whole picture, nor the courage to take bold decisions. Increasing lawlessness and a high crime rate is the result of disempowerment of the people, rising poverty and rampant unemployment. Our dilemma is that we treat it as a law and order problem and try to solve it as such.

**Democracy and the intellectual**

While it is true that in a democracy the majority view should prevail, we are, however, continuously making the mistake of believing that the validity of a proposition depends on the number of people who believe in it. Unfortunately, the truth is not coming home to us that in the fields of politics and economics, the soundness of a belief is often in inverse proportion to the popular support it commands. So what we need today more than anything else is moral leadership — founded on courage, intellectual integrity, and a sense of values. We are surrounded by too many persons who are willing to compromise and temporise. The treason of our intellectuals consists in their not speaking out loud and clear for the values that they, by their vision and the very nature of their personalities, hold sacred. What is

needed is the resolute courage to stand up and be counted in support of a view which is not popular.

### Values and quality of life

We are oblivious of the reality that without acquiring an understanding of and a lively feeling for values we cannot grow as a society of harmoniously developed individuals. We cannot live by the gross national product only. In a democratic polity, the quality of life is to a large extent determined by the availability of the basic human rights and civil liberties which are placed in the chapter on fundamental rights in our constitution. Our constitution-framers were far-sighted in guaranteeing these fundamental rights to our people because without this guarantee the quality of our life would be seriously impaired. The tragedy befalling us is that while striving to raise the standard of living of our people, we are losing the sensitivity towards the quality of life. Consequently, while

our knowledge or range of information is increasing, our ignorance is not diminishing. We forget that the inner strength of our people is our age-old tradition of religious and spiritual values which enable them to hold their heads high despite the climatic adversity and the ravages of rootless leaders. As of now, we definitely have a danger of losing that richness of our values while failing to shed poverty.

### The way ahead: Moderation and compromise

When we live in a democracy, we live in hazard. Democracy involves the cooperation of all perceptive citizens in the real work of managing the country. It means payment to the

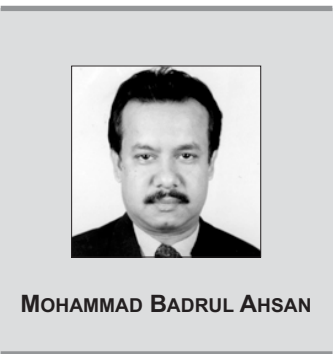
In Bangladesh today, when we are moving on the escalator of corruption and disorder, thinking citizens cannot afford to lay frozen in disgust and dismay. We can not merely look upon the political developments in sorrow and upon our politicians in anger. The problem facing the country has to be solved without delay. In fact, we are racing against time. A problem avoided turns into a crisis; and the crisis not managed can turn into a disaster further down the road. It is time the honest and knowledgeable citizens of our society decide to opt into the democratic process which, unfortunately, they have avoided for so long. They must devote themselves to the task of educating public opinion and the

knowledge, vision, and character to be chosen as candidates for parliamentary and local body election. Such persons can usher in a government which will be strong without being authoritarian and humane without being weak. Singapore is a most striking example of how fast a nation can progress when its cabinet is composed of outstanding talents. We have to understand the difference between a minister selected for his political cunning and a minister of high mental and moral calibre.

There is a deep-felt need for an intelligent and adequate organisation of voters. There should be a citizens' council in every constituency, consisting of impartial non-party individuals who would appraise the candidates on their merit and ability so that the voters are not duped by unscrupulous rabble-rousers. Our people must be helped to cast off the shackles of political feudalism. It is pathetic to see the servile behaviour of our people towards the ministers and legislators. They should be enabled to control the government instead of being dominated. Finally, let us remember that a bad government is the inevitable consequence of an indifferent electorate. Politics will never be cleaner and our economic future will never be brighter unless and until our citizens are willing to give of themselves to the land which gave them birth. Our present situation has turned into a vicious circle. Persons of talent and integrity will not enter public life because of filth and stench; and yet public life cannot be cleansed unless persons of talent and integrity enter it. Let us try to do something and fail, rather than try to do nothing and hope to succeed. For a healthy and clean polity, the period of gestation will prove lengthy and the achievements painfully long but there could not be a worthier course to embark upon.

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# The losing battle of education



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

MY FATHER, amongst many things, was a dreamer by all means. He believed that education would dispel darkness like a breaking dawn, that the day was not too far when enlightened men would walk upon this earth, radiating character and conscience. He worked hard to educate his family, not only by pushing all young men and women to go to school, but also by tutoring them in flocks twice a day. He spent half his wakeful life writing scores of wordbooks for the children of friends, relatives, neighbours, and colleagues. It was his idea of education. Educated people must have strong vocabulary.

It has been many years since my father had expressed his optimism. There has seen strong social movements since then, concerted efforts on national and international fronts to underscore the benefits of universal education. The number of programmes and institutions have increased. The literacy rate has gone up and more girls are going to school. This is not just true for Bangladesh. This is more or less the global scene.

The good news is that the future of education looks more manage-

able than its past. The World Bank President Jim Wolfensohn has recently assessed that it would take \$3.6 billion in additional aid flows each year, for the next 7/8 years, to ensure that all children complete primary school. He also said that the cost of per class of 40 children would come to \$1200 including teacher, books, and classroom. Fine. At least we know the size of the problem. It is up to us how we go about the solution. We can ask for more guns and bombs — or better future for our children.

But the question is whether

for their talents, to marry into higher class, to get a fair chance at life and all its opportunities. But the underlying goal of education was ennoblement. It was believed that education had the power to change, that it could take anyone from any background and turn him into a respectable person. My father was a product of that ennoblement, the posthumous son of a farmer, a dark-skinned rustic who sold incense sticks and candles in the village market to put himself through school, to become first in his family to go to college, get a job and rub shoulders with the enlightened

those who want to make money, because there are quicker alternatives. Given the material hunger in our life, money can compensate for most of our needs, including finesse and manners, which were once the territory of learning.

My father used to say that there was no knowledge without college. He was obsessed with his obsession that one must learn before one could earn, that reading and writing were necessary for the cultivation of conscientious man, who could see the black and the white, thus learning how to cope with the gray. My

the effect would be even smaller.

It is a sign of erosion in the goodwill of education, which is failing to attract students. Education is no longer tempting because it is no longer linked with success, although the meritorious children of disadvantaged families are still going to school and crashing over poverty every now and then. But that crashing over is not happening on a large scale, on a scale that was supposed to become rule not exception.

In that respect, education has gone the way of religion as increasing rituals intensified the crisis of

hustle and bustle of income and spending. But life is not a fact of education, which would have been the ideal case. That was supposed to be the magic of education, giving anybody who worked hard the wonder touch of a lapidary where uncut diamonds are cut and polished to become precious and promising.

What is religion if it does not cleanse your soul? Likewise, what is education if it does not cultivate your soul? Education is more than going to class everyday, more than homework, more than grades, more than learning how to read, write, or spell. Education is more than merit, which is the inherent quality of a person to achieve excellence. Man excelled even when there was not learning, when there was no school to teach him what was best.

Education arose out of the same reason a successful experiment becomes a commercial exploit. The school system is nothing but affirmation of an optimism that what is good for one can be replicated for many. That is why the key word for education is learning. It is an institutional approach towards taking the best of few and spreading it amongst many.

My father believed that it was possible and he lived for it. As a young man, he earned money to spend on education and encouraged others to do the same. But things have changed since then. People now go to school so that they can earn money. No wonder a lot of people are cutting out the middle man. They are avoiding education and heading straight for the money. My father was a dreamer and he did not know it.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

## CROSS TALK

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education is still the beacon of hope. Education today is more cosmetic than convincing. People like to wear it like a badge or a title, something they need in order to find work, for social status, marriage-fixing, business card, and other uses. Education is all about brand names, foreign or local, US or UK, public or private. Education is an end unto itself, not a means to attain any higher goals.

There was a time when education used to have higher goals, one of which was to overcome poverty. People without any means or family name, could count on education to get out of rural life, to get recognition

folks. So, the ultimate goal of education was value addition. It was about making man something more than he was inside the skin. There was something magical about education, something which transformed the flesh, blood and bones and harmonised mind with body to make a more sophisticated animal. It was demand for this animal which created jobs, which created skills.

The biggest dilemma of education today is whether it develops the personality or the skills of a person. Does it prepare him for the tussles of life or the tasks at work? Perhaps education is no longer a big draw for

father was convinced that enrollment in school was a sure and definite road to ennoblement.

That transaction is no longer valid, which means people do not have reasons to believe that education is necessary, that it can uplift a person in his soul and goal, that it is the best way to succeed in life, the most honourable means in the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. One study conducted at the World Bank considered the effect of halving the distance to school for children in 21 countries. In rural Chad, it showed a boost in enrollment by less than 5 percent. In other 20 countries, it was determined that

faith. We have more campuses and more curricula, yet education is losing its bite. Neither education nor the educated is as respectable as the old days, when my father used to peddle goods in the village market. He found it endearing to the entire village because he was doing it to pay for his education.

Education is now comparable to the Wizard of Oz bereft of his wonder machine. It is still there, churning and turning, making the right noise, spitting out graduates of one sort or another, putting the labels on them, but somehow missing the right mark of education. Education is just a fact of life like crime, politics,

## OPINION

# Political reform, not language lessons

GOBINDA BAR

THE US Ambassador Harry K Thomas will reportedly provide scholarships to 40 madrasa students to learn English. The rationale, as described, is to help them learn English so that they can get better scope to be connected with the international arena. Announcing the scholarships at a ceremony recently, the US Ambassador said that English would not only open the door to a bright future and better economy, but also help people understand each other better. Ambassador Harry K Thomas called upon the students to achieve efficiency in English to "knock on the door of the state of world knowledge." The ambassador argued that English has become the language of trade and commerce and Bangladesh's economic success is closely linked to the education and English fluency of its citizens. He also cited the importance of the internet, saying that everyone needed to learn English to use it.

In today's world, nobody will question the importance and necessity of the English language. But why the US Ambassador is giving scholarships to Madrasa students is an obvious question. And the scholarship project came at a time when there is a growing trend of rising fundamentalism, terrorism, clandestine arms hauls, and bombings. All these issues have been reported to be linked with the religious fundamentalists. In the international arena, the US image is also affected because of waging a war in a Muslim country like Iraq and the US support for Israel against Palestine. In this context, the US Ambassador's scholarship programme has a strategic importance — to get on good terms with fundamentalism and its perceived foreground, the madrassas.

Madrassas are Muslim religious schools where the students are given religious teachings according to the Koran and Sunnah. Considering the present-world reality, many Muslim moderates demanded modernisation of the

Politicking with issues of national interest will only contribute to destroy the democracy, jeopardise people's security, and affect the whole nation. Critical issues like fundamentalism and superstition cannot be addressed through language education. The only solution is political reform.

madrasa education curriculum. But the Muslim clerics turned it down saying that the "modernisation" proposal was a conspiracy to westernise and Christianise Islam. They also think that the madrasa education is modern because Islam is modern and it doesn't need any reform. They believe that the madrasa curriculum is rich and it contains lessons to manage the human lives in today's world. But the madrasa education has remained to be a matter of concern for the US. There have been lots of propositions that the madrasa education system was the "cocoon of terror."

As the rising trend of Islamic terrorism is baffling the west, there are efforts in place to analyse the

causes of terrorism. Except the political and economic reasons, analysts are putting importance on ignorance, superstition, and lack of modern knowledge. As in Pakistan, Sudan, and Afghanistan, madrassas in Bangladesh have been ill-famed for their alleged links to fundamentalism-guided terrorist politics. Several newspapers have published reports on arms training conducted either in madrassas or involving madrasa students and teachers. In retaliation, the madrasa students and teachers, backed by some religion-based political parties, threatened to kill the reporters and editors concerned and to close the newspapers down. They also threatened to "cleanse"

the "unholy elements" from Bangladesh if they didn't stop such "negative propaganda against Islam." With a well-organised political patronage and foreign financial support, the madrassas in Bangladesh have developed as strong institutions.

Against this backdrop, it is a positive move to award scholarships to madrasa students to learn English for attaining modern global knowledge. But the scholarships are neither enough nor sustainable. To inspire the madrassas to reform in a coherent manner, there is no alternative to reforming their curriculum to incorporate modern knowledge so that everybody concerned is benefited. But it's not an easy

task. The vested-interest political groups who run and back the madrasa system are unlikely to agree to such proposals because they may jeopardise their vested interest. Strategically, they will consume the financial benefits but wouldn't agree to any fundamental changes.

On the other hand, thousands of madrasa students will continue to be deprived of modern knowledge if an institutional reform measure is not taken. Reforming the whole madrasa curriculum, including training of the teachers, exchange visits of teachers and students, are some effective steps for mainstreaming the education system. But these steps can never

be taken without a political reform. Only political will can be effective enough to break into the resistance from within the madrasa system. The most important issue is that the madrasas are guided and run by some political ideologies. So, the system has to be changed from within through political decisions and measures.

This political role has to be played by the Bangladesh political system. The government must realise the danger of keeping a huge population trapped in an age-old education system that doesn't equip people with productive knowledge. Without practical and productive knowledge, people are bound to be frustrated and frustration leads people to destruction. This is perhaps the rationale of launching the scholarship programme by the US Ambassador for the madrasa students.

Because of attacks on US people and interests around the world, the US nowadays is worried about fundamentalist and destructive politics. Our nonchalant govern-

ment and progressive political parties must also understand this danger and act now to save the democratic process from the danger of impending religion-based politics and terrorism. Being in control of power, the primary responsibility is with the government to act and sit with the main opposition and other progressive political parties to chalk out effective measures.

Coming out of the current trend of politics, the opposition parties also shouldn't make politics with the issue because failure to reform and improve the madrasa education system will also affect them equally. Politicking with issues of national interest will only contribute to destroy the democracy, jeopardise people's security, and affect the whole nation. Critical issues like fundamentalism and superstition cannot be addressed through language education. The only solution is political reform.

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