

Bangladesh's women ahead of others

Good news, yet a long way to go

THE good news about Bangladesh's women is that in terms of status and gender equality they are quite ahead of women in such South Asian nations as India (except for Kerala) and Pakistan. The bad news is that when it comes to a question of access to reproductive health services, employment and decision-making, they yet have a pretty long way to go. Perhaps these are truths we have known for quite a while. What a report of the World Bank has now done is inform us officially of the conditions in which Bangladesh's women find themselves today. Implicitly, the report is also a broad hint of what must be done further to have the other half of our society take full and absolute part in any and all development-related activities in the country.

On the whole, there is surely a sense of satisfaction we feel about the contents of the report. The efforts made in the last two decades or so concerning women's progress have by and large had an impact, a reality we can spot through the increasing numbers of women striking out into areas where they have been able to assert themselves. And we are not merely speaking of such areas as the ready-made garments sector. There is a bigger canvas here, one that includes women joining the civil service, the police force, the armed forces and even business. Thanks to the activities of various women's organisations, Bengali women have made themselves increasingly and properly vocal about not only their rights but also about the need for an end to all forms of discrimination against them in what still remains a male dominated society. But such an optimistic picture should not be reason for complacency on anyone's part. There is yet a lot to be done before ours can become a society where women's rights will be taken for granted.

It will be through ensuring their full and proper access to health care, especially in the rural regions, that the idea of women's progress can be advanced further. In the job market, women still do not come by the support and encouragement they need. Of course they have made progress in the civil service and other fields, but percentage-wise, despite their academic background, they are still way behind men. It is not unusual for women not to be made part of the decision-making progress, be it in government, business and even journalism. And yet there are signs of hope, as in the recommendations regarding the laws of inheritance relating to women recently focused on by the government. These proposals contain much that is appreciable and logical, which is why any misinterpretation of them will be unfortunate. In the coming days, therefore, the emphasis ought to be on a faster entry by women into the mainstream.

Domestic violence

Police can do more to curb it

THE seminar on the role of police in preventing domestic violence has brought forth the harsh truth that such violence accounts for a huge number of deaths of women -- far greater than what is generally believed. Equally mind-boggling is the fact that 60 percent of our women are tortured in some way or the other, which indeed presents a grim picture of domestic violence.

Yet, the victims seldom seek help from the police. This is obviously a reflection, in part, on the law enforcers' negative image and in part, on the tortured women's diffidence in lodging complaints with the police.

Women-bashing in different forms has become a problem of great magnitude. Reports of dowry-related deaths are being published regularly in the newspapers, acid attacks are on the rise, and gang-raping of women no longer evokes the kind of social revulsion that it ought to have. Various women rights groups and NGOs are working for rehabilitating the victims. But that cannot alter the shameful truth that we as a nation have failed miserably to protect the rights of women, which include their physical safety. While the decision makers vow to establish the rights of vulnerable women, incidents in which the latter fall victim to beastly crimes take place on a regular basis.

The predicament of women and girls exacerbates once they step out of their homes. There are the eve teasers harassing girls, with the law enforcers appearing to be quite reluctant to do anything about it. It is difficult to believe that they cannot rein in the unruly teenagers whose activities have led to quite a few girls' committing suicide!

So, the law enforcers have to play an assertive role in curbing domestic or any type of violence against women. The community should also play its part in dissuading thugs from harassing girls while the latter report their plight to receptive ears in good time for preventive action. The police should receive the complaints with seriousness. The police have to prove that they are here to punish the culprits, and not to harass the innocent victims. This has to be ensured to protect all vulnerable people in society, including the women in distress.

Swindling by fake NGOs



A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE reports run by The Daily Star and other dailies during the last seven days, on so called NGOs vanishing with about Tk 500 crore after swindling the poor villagers is deeply shocking. Four persons have died so far, three of them of heart attack and the other by committing suicide, being unable to sustain the terrible shock of losing the last penny.

According to reports, 30 fake NGOs operating in remote villages in Natore, Rajshahi and neighbouring districts, swindled about 10 lakh poor people who trusted them to get weekly dividends. People, enthusiastic about making quick money, invested with them even after selling all their belongings or taking loans.

On the morning of February 29, the villagers found that all the officials of the NGO Freedom Unnayan Sangstha had vanished overnight with nearly Tk 250 crore collected from about two lakh members. Several other NGOs in the area vanished in a similar fashion also with crores of taka collected from their members, seizing the opportunity of the Natore district administration's lax management.

Meanwhile, the tendency of

vanishing with public money spreads elsewhere, as another NGO in Sylhet named Islamic Development Foundation disappeared with about Tk 50 lakh collected from over 500 members.

A three-member probe committee from the Social Welfare Directorate in Dhaka arrived in Natore on March 6, and its primary investigation revealed that the Natore Social Welfare office registered 59 NGOs since January 2007. Most of them were engaged in

dishonest members of law enforcement agencies helped these NGOs to carry on their illegal operation. The victims said police escort for the NGO men and law enforcers' frequent visits to their offices made them confident about investing.

It is undeniable that NGOs have enormous contribution in a number of areas, including poverty alleviation. NGOs have also demonstrated their relative advantage over the local government bodies

political activities.

Mishandling of foreign funds by many NGOs is another major allegation. The NGOs, numbering over 1,500, obtain funds from donors. Some 34 foreign founded major Islamic NGOs are registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau, and 15 of them are getting over Tk 200 crore in donation every year.

The money obtained by each of these NGOs in a year, varying from Tk 5 crore to Tk 70 crore, mainly comes from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait

more accountable for better benefit of the poor. Weak regulatory and monitoring mechanisms and an apparent state of impunity have contributed largely towards enabling some local NGOs to indulge in corruption and misuse foreign funds meant for poverty alleviation.

The World Bank also underlined a good number of areas relating to NGOs' operations that require regulatory reforms. The areas include financial accountability

BY THE NUMBERS

Considering the size of the sector and its immense contribution to socio-economic development, the government should take immediate steps to form an independent NGO commission to ensure fool-proof supervision and to bring the overall activities of the NGOs under a reasonably satisfactory mechanism. The NGO Affairs Bureau, the lone regulatory body, set up on March 1, 1990, has not been able to perform as an effective regulatory and monitoring authority.

illegal business, which the office grossly ignored.

There are 12 laws for registering and regulating NGOs. But most of the NGOs have their registration under the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Regulation and Control) Ordinance 1961, administered by the Social Welfare Directorate, which provides, it seems, even the fake NGOs with the opportunities of getting registered, due to some loopholes in the ordinance.

According to local people, a large number of NGOs sprang out at Natore and surrounding areas over the last one and a half years apparently under the patronisation of the local administration and influential people.

They complained that unholy nexus of the NGO men with the

in promoting participatory development at grassroots level. Their innovation and skill in micro-credit operation have drawn global attention.

But there are numerous allegations of corruption and irregularities against many NGOs. They are blamed for misappropriation of funds allocated for poverty alleviation, and diversion of those to organisations with no link to poverty alleviation.

A trend has also developed in such NGOs to employ influential persons, especially retired bureaucrats, with high salary, who can use their network to gain special facilities from the government and to cover up irregularities. Allegations have also been raised that some NGOs are involved in dubious

and United Arab Emirates. Some of these NGOs also get funds from the US and UK. There also has been allegation that a good number of NGOs have been using the cheap slogan of poverty alleviation as a pretext to fulfil the hidden agenda of donors.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has termed them as a mid-level corrupt sector, and recommended forming an independent NGO commission to oversee their activities. TIB noted lack of transparency and accountability in the sector, as well as serious irregularities in their dealings.

The chairman of the Regulatory Reforms Commission said that NGOs must be put under a strong regulatory framework and made

and transparency that essentially involves proper auditing. It is also alleged that NGOs appoint friendly auditors for auditing and preparing their audit and financial statements.

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The NGO Affairs Bureau, the lone regulatory body, set up on March 1, 1990, has not been able to perform as an effective regulatory and monitoring authority perhaps due to its institutional framework.

NGOs like the Brac, Grameen Bank, Proshika and Gonoshashthya Kendro started their rehabilitation activities for the war victims, especially for women and children, immediately after independence of Bangladesh. These NGOs have so many stories of successes in the fields of poverty alleviation, developing a non-formal education programme for poor children and providing health services at the doorsteps of poor villagers. They even enhance image of the country abroad.

The number of the NGOs has increased tremendously in the past decade. There are 48,635 NGOs registered with the Social Welfare Department. Sadly, most of these NGOs are lacking transparency in spending the huge amount of money received from the foreign donors, and are tarnishing greatly the image of the sector. The NGO sector really needs to be better regulated.

Swindling of poor villagers' money by the so-called NGOs is not a new incident in the country. There are several instances that the organised racketeers pretending to run NGOs have made rural Bangladesh a happy hunting ground for swindling ignorant villagers.

Ample reasons have been there for raising doubt about the intention of the NGOs in Natore, promising 4 to 6 times higher profit than the investment. The local administration and social welfare offices cannot avoid their responsibilities for turning a blind eye to the illegal operation of such fake NGOs.

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EU, India and evolving opportunities for South Asia



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

THE latest summit between the European Union and India held in Delhi towards the end of 2007 offered both sides an opportunity to inject much-needed momentum into their hitherto relatively uninspiring relationship. There was an effort to identify a qualitative leap forward in relations. There was reference to shared democratic values and common goals and the need to strengthen the existing patchwork of sectoral cooperation initiatives. India in particular was in buoyant mode as it reiterated its views on regional flashpoints and global economic concerns.

The EU, already mesmerized by China's rapidly expanding market, is now beginning to pay more attention to developing relations with India. Indian policy-makers are also trying to bring EU-India ties out of the shadow cast by Delhi's budding relationship with the United States. Successive EU enlargements, the Union's growing reputation as a global defence and security actor, and its continued strong economic performance have also become key reasons for India's increased interest in Europe.

European companies with global ambitions have also reciprocated India's interest in Europe. They are recognizing that they cannot afford to ignore this country any longer. The remarkable success of India's information technology sector (including the rise of its Euro 33 billion computer services outsourcing industry), and the emergence of Indian world-class industrial giants eager to scour Europe for new markets and acquisitions, have also put the country on the EU business map.

This increase in mutual interest has led to attempts to forge a strategic partnership. A Joint Action Plan

has been hammered out covering a vast array of areas for increased cooperation, ranging from energy, terrorism and maritime transport to space technology. The two sides have also agreed to start exploratory talks on a possible new EU-India Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to replace an accord signed in 1994 and to set up a European Business and Technical Centre in Delhi to promote business partnerships and foster better mutual understanding of EU and

match of aspirations between the EU and India. The Union, in this context, has made no secret of its disappointment at India's failure to stand up for perceived democracy and human rights during Myanmar's recent military crackdown on dissidents. The strategic partnership has also failed to soften Delhi's tough line in the World Trade Organization's Doha trade negotiations, with India continuing to resist US and EU demands for further cuts in industrial tariffs. Furthermore, India has refused to

agreed that the planned establishment of the European Business Centre in Delhi will further EU business interests and contacts in India. It is also believed that further dialogue on regulatory cooperation should assist their envisaged cooperation in the energy sector and help meet India's hunger for access to clean technology, expansion of its use of renewable energy, combating water and air pollution, soil degradation and a further loss of biodiversity.

The negotiations also cover intellectual property rights, competition policy and government procurement. India on its side, has already agreed to substantially reduce import tariffs and various additional duties, taxes and charges that are levied on top of the basic customs duty, resulting in what the European Union regards as a complex and non-transparent system.

These negotiations are being pursued because both sides

insurance, banking and aviation, all of which remain restricted to foreign investors.

It would, however, be worthwhile to note here that despite the vast array of new issues under discussion, poverty alleviation, health and education still remain the primary focus of EU policy towards India. This is not surprising given that the large majority of that country's population still lives on less than \$2 a day. The EU has earmarked substantial funds for this purpose. It will be used to support India's efforts to achieve its Millennium Development Goals in the health and education sectors, through a range of measures including public administration reforms, decentralization and community empowerment, deepening school enrolment, better quality education and teacher training.

The EU is also focusing on sub-regional disparities within India. They, in this regard, are suggesting generation of additional employment and economic opportunities by India and further opening its economy to international trade and foreign direct investment. The EU believes that such a step within the tightly protected service sectors such as insurance and retailing will be particularly helpful. India is agreeable in principle but not in agreement with regard to the speed of its implementation.

I have focused today on EU-India relations because that should be a pointer for all the other South Asian countries in the evolution of their relationship with the EU. Bangladesh in particular has several areas that need to be pursued with seriousness. I am referring in this context not only to capacity building and facilitation of governance areas but also in matters like improvement of backward and forward linkages in industry, agro-processing, tackling the bane of climate variability, usage of alternative sources of energy (including nuclear energy), pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and the creation of better telecommunication networking. One can only hope that we are also able to seize this possibility of expanded opportunities.

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POST BREAKFAST

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However, it is also clear that differences remain. Despite the impressive array of meetings and the range of issues under discussion, both sides are still struggling to give real substance to their strategic partnership. One key reason for this is that while India and the EU share many common values, they have very different views on what 'strategic partnership' means in practice. This divergence in outlook has reflected differing geo-strategic interests and different levels of economic development. EU and India also seem to have differences on how to use their strategic partnership pertaining to issues like the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, state failures and regional conflicts. India's immediate concerns are understandably very different from those of the Union and its Member States.

As it aspires to play a more forceful global role, India views its strategic partnerships with the EU and the US as vehicles for ensuring greater worldwide visibility, prestige and political clout. Its foreign policy agenda is also dominated by subjects like rivalry with China, tensions with Pakistan, and political turmoil in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. This has led to a significant mis-

accept EU calls for stricter binding commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to combat climate change, arguing that a developing country cannot be expected to slow down the pace of its industrialization. Differences have also emerged on the US-India nuclear agreement regarding access to US civil nuclear technology. Several EU member states have argued that the deal lacks sufficient safeguards to prevent Delhi from continuing to produce nuclear weapons by diverting its own nuclear fuel to weapons production.

Indians continue to find EU institutions bewildering and complex and, for many, the focus remains on the Union as an economic rather than a political partner. This perception has now led the EU, after their latest summit, to the decision of developing a wider network of contacts in India in government, business and non-government circles to project a more accurate view of its multifaceted identity as both a leading trade bloc and an increasingly influential global political player. It has also been agreed that the Indians will have to make a similar effort to ensure that Europeans recognize the diversity of their country.

In this context it is generally

India and the EU hope to work together in many sectors. Delhi views Europe as an important source of high technology. In this context, India is participating in the European satellite project Galileo and working with the Union (as well as Japan, South Korea, Russia and the US) in the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) programme designed to produce electricity using nuclear fusion. Cooperation links have also been established between the Indian Space Research Organization and the European Space Agency. Such strategic networking will enhance India's regional profile. The two sides have also initiated a security dialogue on terrorism, migration issues and visa policy, and EU-India working groups have been established to study the prospects for cooperation in pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, and information and communication technologies.

Negotiations are also underway on a prospective EU-India Free Trade Agreement which will focus on reducing tariffs on trade in manufactured goods, removing non-tariff barriers, liberalizing trade in services, easing investment flows and trade facilitation.

believe that trade between the EU and India could certainly do with a boost. While EU-India trade has grown impressively over the years from Euro 4.4 billion in 1980 to more than Euro 46 billion in 2006 India still accounts for only 1.8 percent of total EU trade. By contrast, trade with the EU represents almost 20 percent of India's exports and imports, making the Union India's largest trading partner. In 2006, EU imports from India (mainly textiles/clothing, agricultural products and chemicals) were worth a total of Euro 22.4 billion, while EU exports to India (mostly machinery and chemical products) totaled Euro 24 billion.

It is being hoped by both sides that expansion in trade will also enhance investment. The EU is presently India's largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI), especially in the energy, telecommunication and transport sectors. In 2005, EU investment outflows to India amounted to Euro 2.2 billion 1.3 percent of total FDI outflows from the Union. EU officials, however, believe that there is still scope for improvement. They have again pointed out that greater liberalization is required in India's important sectors like retail distribution,

OPINION

An alternative to foreign loans

ALI IDRIS

THE country still depends on foreign loans given by the World Bank, ADB and also other countries of the world for financing its annual development plans and other infrastructural projects. Every year shortages of internal revenue arise while implementing the annual development plans in the national budget and to meet the shortages the country has to resort to foreign loans or loans from internal banking system. Apparently the foreign loans appear to be cheap with interest rates ranging from 2 percent to 6 percent per annum, but at the end of the day total costs rise from 20 percent to 30 percent per annum. How it happens is described below:

A) Salaries and allowances, accommodation cost, air fare,

insurance premium for life and health, leave fare and entertainment, etc paid to the consultants and technicians of the donors/loan providers add to the cost of loan.

b) The exchange value of the currency of loan appreciates rapidly against Taka resulting in considerable increase of the principal and interest after 10 to 20 years.

c) In the event of commodity or suppliers credit, the price fixed by the donor cannot be negotiated or verified and thus most often has to be accepted at accelerated price.

This way ultimate implementation leads to lesser numbers of projects and higher amount of cost. Consequently the economic development of the country slows down. Hence if the government avails itself of less costly loans economic development will be expedited and dignity of the country no way

embarrassed because availing loans from outside most often means complying with conditions not desirable and not conducive to wellbeing of the masses. The alternative source of loans in Taka at lesser cost is proposed below

Alternative source

Fortunately about 50,000 expatriates and NRBs currently reside and work in various countries of the world. The remittances sent by them now amount to about Tk 50,000 crore annually. It may be estimated that the bank balances of the NRBs may amount to thousands of crores of Taka. The expatriates and NRBs save a portion of their remittances in the existing savings schemes viz. wage earner bonds, non-resident FC account, Dollar Bonds, etc and spend the remaining in non-productive

investments. Both expatriates and NRBs look for risk-free investments which they cannot afford or manage to engage in joint ventures or in proprietorship businesses in the country. If they are given an opportunity to invest in shares of a bank which is guaranteed by the government itself, they will come up with all their savings which will amount to thousands of crores. The money available in the savings schemes cannot be used in long term mega projects by the government, but the savings converted into capital of the proposed Bank can be used in financing the mega projects for long terms.

Establishment of the proposed bank

The bank can be called "Bangladesh NRB and Expatriates Bank." It will not be formed under the

Companies Act or Banking Companies Act. A special ordinance or Act should be passed for establishing the bank. The Act or ordinance will define the capital structure/amount, shareholdings, duties and responsibilities of the shareholders, directors, advisors, sharing of profit/losses etc. The shares are proposed to be held by the expatriates/ NRBs only, the government will not hold any share. The authorised capital of the bank can be Tk 1,00,000 crore which may be paid-up phase by phase through IPO. The liabilities of the shareholders will be guaranteed by the government which, in exchange, will take loans and avail other facilities. Though the expatriates/ NRBs will hold 100 percent shares of the bank, it is proposed that they will have 50 percent vote and the government

will have 50 percent vote in the Board. All decisions will be taken with consensus of both the parties. In the event of disagreement majority votes of the advisors will be applied to arrive at decision. The advisors may be Bangladesh Bank, Bangladesh Economics Samity, BSB, BSRs, the Engineers Institute, ICB, Bangladesh Bankers Samity, FBCCI, ICAB, ICMA, etc.

Activities and management

The activities of the bank are proposed to be giving loans to the government for financing the important national infrastructural and revenue-generating projects. ADP projects which are not revenue-generating may be financed if the government undertakes to

pay a good rate of return/ interest to the bank. The projects financed by the bank will be implemented through international bidding and at competitive price. Tenor, rates of interests, repayment instalments etc will be determined by consensus of the shareholders, government, and the advisors. The shareholders may, in addition to interest, enjoy a part of the net profits earned by the projects as determined by all the three parties. All transactions of the bank and its projects will be exempt from income tax. The Bank will be listed in Dhaka and other international stock exchanges of the world. The shareholders may buy and sell their shares in those exchanges. The management will be run by veteran, experienced local or expatriate managing director and officers reporting to

the Board.

Utility to government, people and country

Accumulated savings of about 50 lac expatriates and NRBs which is either lying idle or earning very little amount of interest will penetrate into the country and be converted into share capital. This capital will be a huge source of finance in foreign exchange for the country. This money will end continuous dependence on foreign loans and add dignity to the country. Thus economic development of the country will be accelerated, expatriates and NRBs will earn higher return on their savings, their ownership of shares of the Bank will create a sense of responsibility and connection to the country.

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