

Indo-Bangla meet: Talks on transit and water issues

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ABU REZA

THE Indian high commissioner's observation that transit rights through Bangladesh is essentially an economic issue, not political, is, prima facie, correct. In view of this, and to extend friendly cooperation in the area of transit transport, Bangladesh, after gaining independence in December 1971, restored the "Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade" in 1972, which was suspended by the Pakistan authorities after the Indo-Pak war of 1965.

This protocol allows India to make full use of the most important and cost effective transit operation on as many as eight inland waterway routes. India is making the most successful use of the facility, as the phenomenal increase in India's transit traffic through Bangladesh since 1972 will bear out.

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In the immediate context, however, the concerned Saarc countries can tremendously benefit through cooperation in the area of transit transport to promote trade, transport and tourism.

Within Saarc, cooperation between India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, can be more easily enhanced. In fact, India, Nepal and Bhutan can particularly benefit from the low cost Bangladesh inland water transport facilities, as the Indian experience will confirm.

There is urgent need for Indian consideration to allow Nepal-Bangladesh and Bhutan-Bangladesh road transit to operate up to the river heads in Bangladesh, whereby these two countries can benefit from low cost Bangladesh inland water transport and sea ports. So, a combination of road and waterways, through India and Bangladesh, would enormously benefit the two land-locked countries, thus lessening the burden on the Calcutta port.

Bangladesh has made enormous, disproportionate investment in highway construction to enhance inter-district connectivity

by road, perhaps ignoring the full potential of inland water transport, which offered relatively low transportation cost on many of the comparable routes. Nonetheless, the standard of its highways remains poor and dangerous compared to the minimum standards adopted for any international highway, in Thailand for instance.

The recent World Bank study on Revival of Inland Water Transport would confirm that the prospect of inland water transport is enormous in Bangladesh. Therefore, demand for transit through Bangladesh by India, Nepal and Bhutan, can be met for a much higher level of traffic if the depth of Bangladesh rivers can be increased with cooperation from India.

The withdrawal of waters by erecting barrages across almost all rivers, including the Ganges, has been detrimental for everyone, including India's interest in terms of securing year-round transit facility from the low cost inland water transport system. There is a possibility that larger vessels can be used at lower unit cost throughout the year. For Bangladesh, it has been an economic disaster.

Bangladesh must, therefore, raise this issue in the meeting on transit and water in Delhi.

Also, the Bangladesh highway system, as its very low standard of safety would confirm, is not fit for heavy road transit traffic. Besides, the high cost of fuel and steel, which are likely to go even higher, will make road transport operation increasingly more prohibitive for all the countries, apart from the environmental damage that heavy road traffic would inflict on the country.

Bangladesh has no aggregate, thus, road building based on imported aggregates and bitumen, among other imported items, will make road transit haulage less viable economically. However, there are many other technical issues, which would need in-depth examination by the concerned experts. Thus, for everybody's interest, the Bangladesh inland water transport system should be urgently revived.

India can make the most important contribution by releasing not only the agreed upon quantity of water but also by augmenting its discharge. In the coming Delhi meeting, Bangladesh should make a special plea for India's cooperation in this respect, on economic grounds alone.

India's recent request for gas pipeline transit from Myanmar to India through Bangladesh should have been subjected to detailed technical and financial study for mutual benefit. Bangladesh will

itself need, before long, to import gas from Myanmar. The gas pipeline could easily attract foreign private investment, and on a BOT (build, operate and transfer) basis Bangladesh could become the potential owner of the pipeline at a future date.

Given a captive market and safe investment, everyone concerned could benefit. India could obtain gas without having to invest in the pipeline, and Bangladesh could easily attract foreign private investment on a BOT basis, and, given the long life of the facility, it could earn an enormous amount of rental and transit income for many years in the future. Bangladesh may still explore this possibility in the forthcoming meeting by way of offering cooperation in transit facility to India for the Myanmar gas.

It is just such an investment in the infrastructure field, where one country makes investment through BOT, thus acquiring ownership of the assets at a future date that brings benefits to itself as well as to its neighbours at a low marginal cost. Given an appropriate regulatory environment, non-recourse financing in the shape of foreign private investment can easily be attracted.

The operation is literally in a captive market, with virtually no risk and uncertainty, and assured rental and transit income will generate sufficiently strong cash flow for the investor to recoup the investment with profit within, say,

twenty years and, beyond it, Bangladesh would become the sole owner of the transit asset (facility).

Everyone is the winner, including India, which will get transit without having to invest in the pipeline. In passing, it can be said that what applies to a gas pipeline project is equally valid for the Tata proposed steel and fertiliser factories. The BOT approach should be one of the options considered.

There are relevant UN conventions to which all the concerned countries are parties. Conceivably, a Saarc version of a convention allowing for the TIR (Transport International Routier) Carnet and TIR Carnet du Passage en Doune may be adopted in the inland waterway transit field, which could be undertaken under the auspices of Saarc and be applicable in the entire Saarc region, from Bangladesh up to Afghanistan.

It may be apt to remember that Switzerland is a landlocked country, but the Europe-wide transit transport regulatory framework is so efficient that the Swiss do not suffer from any geographical disadvantages. Similarly, the Mekong countries comprising Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam have recently adopted a region-wide transit transport framework for the benefit of all. India can, in fact, give leadership whereby, to begin with, the eastern part of Saarc countries can move towards a more economically efficient transit transport regime. Then,



Freer transit, better trade.

when the Indo-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir is amicably resolved, all the Saarc countries including India will have easy access up to Afghanistan, in fact up to the whole of Central Asia.

A scenario can be envisaged whereby India could be a potential transit and transport bridge between East Asia and Central Asia. This is a possibility that needs to be addressed with vision, leadership and willingness to share and give. The fundamental basis of such an international transport regime is mutual economic benefit to all, at which the Indian High Commissioner has rightly hinted.

This is the message the Bangladesh delegation should take to Delhi, make its presentation at the technical level, buy time to undertake detailed technical economic studies of the various propositions and, thus, lay a basis for fuller and more fruitful discussion with the elected leaders of the concerned countries in the not so distant future. Let us hope.

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Youth to the fore

If we look at the evolution of Bangladesh, we will see that all successful movements, starting from the language movement till the end of autocracy, were possible only because of the involvement of the young people. Almost all of them were students.

M. SHOEBO CHOWDHURY

AGES ago, Rabindranath Tagore said: "Youth, I do adore thee, Age, I do abhor thee." Tagore recognised the ultimate torchbearers of a nation, who are the youth. Like Tagore, I also believe in youth, and I consider myself as an active supporter of empowerment of the young in the development of the nation. The nation, today, needs leadership by physically active and educated people. In this article, I will concentrate on the role that the youth played and could play.

Leadership is a hot topic, as more and more institutions grapple with the challenge of building strong, effective and visionary

management structures. The private sector is very advanced in this field, and many government institutions, are now looking to follow suit in cultivating management excellence and leadership.

Bangladesh is emphasising leadership development as a foundation for effective governance and successful nation-building. Eventually, however, the quest for strong moral leadership will necessarily lead to a re-conceptualisation of how we raise and educate our children.

If we believe that politics is the most effective driving force in governing a nation, we must have an efficient team of politicians who will work for the nation. Other forces like education, business, economics,

culture, trade and commerce etc., are the areas for the politicians to work on through strong and beneficial policy making.

If we look at the evolution of Bangladesh, we will see that all successful movements, starting from the language movement till the end of autocracy, were possible only because of the involvement of the young people. Almost all of them were students.

After the fall of Ershad, there were three democratic governments. All of them neglected the building of the nation, rather they built themselves through corruption. Maybe there are some individuals who are truly working for the nation, but this giant corruption group overshadows them. The

youth have always been deprived, though they have always been the key to change.

The most powerful youth forum in our country is the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu). The corrupt politicians had intentionally banned election in Ducusu, and some teachers were also involved. Had there been 'Ducusu' elections regularly in the last 17 years, Bangladesh would have had at least 50 young leaders today. This is only from Ducusu, let alone other universities and colleges. Today's vacuum in leadership is rooted here.

People of the age group 18-45 comprise almost half of the total voters in Bangladesh, but they have no representation at the policy making level because the old leadership intentionally ignored them. Age should not be a limitation. The whole world is changing. Young people all over the world are being empowered gradually. Barack

Obama is comparatively very young, but he may be the next US president.

Another example is British Foreign Minister Mr. David Miliband who prioritised enhancement of young leadership. Even if we look at our own history, we see that Dr. Kamal Hossain was foreign minister at the age of 34. Why can't we think like those days?

The absence of the youth in the building of the nation caused unemployment and degeneration, which is why we are still an LDC.

50 years ago, there were many young people in mainstream politics, and we won in the language movement and the liberation war because of direct involvement of the youth. Politics becomes a people's front when well known young organisers do the field-work by themselves.

Young political leaders, business leaders, academicians and researchers are the dream combina-

tion for building a brighter nation today.

Leadership is created through movements, not just through liaisons, seminars and meetings. Leadership through movement builds character. A leader has to resist the temptation for power and special consideration in making rational decisions.

Effective leadership is a crucial prerequisite in every sphere of social life, and for success in nation-building endeavours. Despite Bangladesh's enormous potential, the inadequacy of leadership has an adverse effect on socio-economic and political development. The country needs honest and effective leadership, not only in politics but also in business, education, media and administration, to resolve conflicts, alleviate poverty, empower women and the disadvantaged, and ensure good governance. Bangladesh is a developing

economy with large income disparities in society. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting further marginalised. This gap, I believe, is a threat to peace because both extremism and terrorism are born out of the hopelessness of poverty. The solution to Bangladesh's poverty is not aid but responsible, competent and compassionate leadership.

Bangladesh today needs home-grown leaders who can unify constituencies and construct a narrative of addition instead of a narrative of division. It is this divisiveness and lack of appreciation of diversity that has often caused violent partisan politics, communal tensions, and discrimination against religious minorities in the country.

I believe we can address this poverty-peace nexus by providing the youth leadership training through action and dialogue. I

believe in focusing on the youth because they are the future leaders of our country. I also believe that, to address the complexities that beset the socio-economic culture of Bangladesh, it is imperative that our future leaders embrace diversity and bridge economic and religious gaps.

Finally, I would like to say, it is time for the 'young people' to work. Think-tanks, civil society and passionate and experienced political leaders could be our inspiration. Elections are forthcoming. The current caretaker government can establish this dream by preparing guidelines for the political parties to nominate at least 30 percent young candidates (aged below 45) for the parliament. Now is the time for the young people to carry our nation forward, and our seniors could train and help them.

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The ugly face of human rights

The United Nations General Assembly, through Resolution 5/146, affirmed that poverty posed the single greatest threat to the survival of the greatest numbers of human beings, and that it was a violation of human dignity, rights and well-being.

S.M. PERVEZ

IN this age of globalisation, we are tired of hearing the term "human rights." And the northern hemisphere, which is more educated, developed and rich, is the leading campaigner of human rights. By now we all know what human rights means. What many of us may not know is the very hypocrisy in human rights, and the politics of human rights. How has it come to this stage? Let us try to know that.

Former Irish president and UN human rights commissioner, Mary Robinson, said in 2002: "I am often asked what is the most serious form of human rights violation in the world to-day, and my reply is

consistent: extreme poverty."

Former UN secretary general Kofi Annan said: "The universal declaration of human rights has, at best, a hollow ring, wherever families eke out an existence on less than a dollar a day, or children die for lack of basic yet life saving care." The United Nations General Assembly, through Resolution 5/146, affirmed that poverty posed the single greatest threat to the survival of the greatest numbers of human beings, and that it was a violation of human dignity, rights and well-being.

Since that resolution, rich countries have been trying to save their faces by indulging in charity. But this small amount of charity could not go far to reduce poverty, except

for giving some credit and maneuvering power to rich countries over the poor. The UN and NGOs should realise that poverty, which is an extreme violation of human rights, cannot fall under charity work, and that fighting poverty must be a prime obligation for the rich.

Against this background, in August 2006, a UN sub-commission for the promotion and protection of human rights adopted guiding principles for the first time in the history of UN. It proposed an international law document which would consider the fight against extreme poverty as an obligation for all states.

The fact is that nearly 24,000 people die every day because of extreme poverty, and the resulting

lack of access to nutrition, clean drinking water and basic medical care. Accordingly, in one hour from this moment, the world will witness the death of another 1000 people. To make a stark comparison, this toll is the equivalent of a passenger jet carrying 500 people crashing every 30 minutes. And, in this case, three out of four of the victim "passengers" are children of age five or under.

Again, more than a billion people, one in every six human beings, still live on less than a dollar a day and do not have the means to stay alive in the face of chronic hunger and disease. In other words, it is poverty that kills. A single bite from a malaria-bearing mosquito is enough to end a child's life for want of a mosquito net or treatment worth \$1.

The director of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Jack Deof, said: "If only 3% of world's yearly military expen-

diture could be reduced and utilised for development of agriculture and food then a better life could be offered to 850 millions hungry human beings. Only in 2006, global military expenditure was \$1.2 trillion. On the other hand, one country has spoiled food worth \$100 billion, the fat people of the world spoiled food worth \$20 billion. Given the above statistics, how it can be explained to the conscious people of the world that only \$30 billion could not be collected for saving the lives of around 860 million poor human beings."

From the above statement of the FAO director, two realities of the present world have become clear. First, the extreme helplessness of the majority of human beings. Second, the extreme disparity between the rich and the poor. And both are the creation of the minority rich. The endless desire to accumulate wealth and comfort, the

endless greed, and the extreme indifference of the rich towards the poor are pushing millions of poor human beings to their deaths. What can be more shameful and sad for human civilisation than endangering the lives of 1 billion human beings for want of food?

In a separate research, SIPR, a military research entity, showed that the top 100 weapon producers sold weapon worth \$236 billion in 2003 only. And, to sell these weapons and earn money, many insecurities and wars are being stoked by the world powers. As a result, weapons worth \$1 trillion are being purchased every year by various countries of the world. Against this, only \$325 billion are being spent on agriculture every year.

Hence, even if world leaders cannot guarantee food for each human being, they have already ensured 2 bullets per head, and 1 deadly weapon for every 10 human beings. Hence, those who earn

money out of weapons, pushing 1 billion human beings towards death, should not insult the words "human rights" by attaching their names to those words.

Even if we consider the meaning of human rights literally, these human rights campaigners will cut a sorry figure. Many a times, it has been found, world powers do not advocate for implementation of human rights for some issues and countries. Without elaborating, if some one looks at Palestine, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Guantanamo, this will be clear. All these instances demonstrate that protection of human rights has been embroiled in world politics and power.

All countries and people of the world, rich or poor, will have to pay a high price in failing to reduce poverty. It would be a tragedy -- above all for the world's poor -- but rich countries will not be immune to the consequences of failure. In

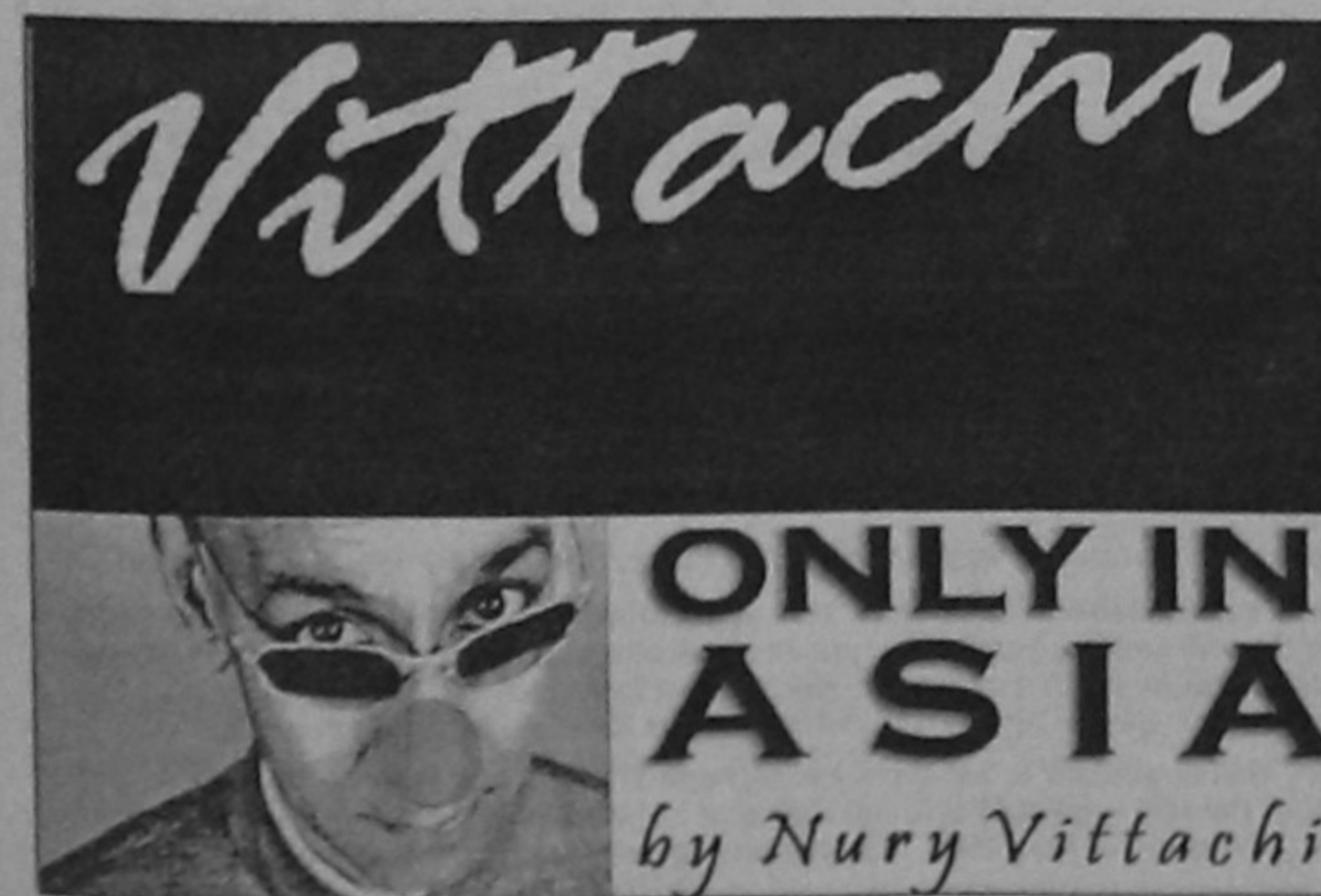
an interdependent world, our shared prosperity and collective security depend critically on success in the war against poverty.

Poverty is the result of historical and contemporary politics. There is growing awareness of the yawning gap between rich and poor nations. As of 1999, according to a UN human development report, 200 richest people doubled their income in past four years to \$1000 billion, and the 3 richest people have more assets than the total assets of the poorest 600 million people.

Poverty can only be eliminated if rich nations and the biggest international agencies and transnational corporations get together in promoting poverty alleviation policies like "Fighting poverty is not a charity but an obligation." Thereby, the ugly face of human right could be turned into a beautiful one.

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Why get free air outside when you can pay for it?



I wrote a column recently about the stupidity of people who pay vast sums for bottled tap water when they have the exact same stuff free on tap in their homes.

I was promptly deluged by mail, which put me straight. "You said it was idiotic to pay for bottled tap water, Mr. Smartypants Columnist, but you are wrong," said Ameena Das. "It is very, very stupid, but not idiotic. What IS idiotic is to pay for canned air."

She knows someone who orders air-in-a-can at \$9 a go, despite the fact that the stuff is freely available

everywhere on earth in a large, conveniently located storage area called The Outdoors.

"He sprays canned air at his computer keyboard and it blows the dust into the air. It swirls and then settles, and then he sprays it again," she said. "Hours of fun."

Actually, I also have a high-tech device that does that. It's called A Mouth. Other readers pointed out that oxygen bars, which first appeared in Japan, can now be found in several countries. While people think these places sell pure oxygen, the stuff is really just ordinary air

with a slightly higher oxygen concentration (30 percent compared to 21 percent).

You can also waste hard cash on ordinary air in the UK. "It is possible to purchase 'Fresh Devon,' 'Welsh' and 'Mancunian' varieties," reader Janet Mann told me. "The problem though, is that the cans are ring-pull types, so one huge lungful and then it's gone for ever."

Reader Vince A. of Melbourne reckons the bottled air business would increase if you had strong, distinctive flavours: "English Countryside" (wet grass and sheep droppings), "French Countryside"

(wet grass, sheep droppings and cheese) and perhaps a few Asian ones too, such as: "Beijing Industrial Summer" (which would be air you can chew -- after all, it's always good to be able to see what you are eating).

Lisa Ip of Hong Kong reckons new mums would buy bottled air. "You can sell anything to new parents with the label 'non-toxic, safe for babies,'" she said.

Her comment reminded me of an Asian brand of bottled water called Jetmate. Each bottle had a warning on it: "Caution: for drinking purpose only." I could never

quite work this out. Did it mean that if you want to give it to your baby to drink, fine, but if you want to wash the toilet, get something better?

The best idea for expanding the air market came from a reader named Samantha, who hankered for chocolate-covered blobs of oxygen. Unlike ordinary canned air, (a) it would taste of something; (b) it would be less fattening than normal chocolate; (c) it would be lightweight so cheaper to ship; and best of all, (d) it would be an excuse to eat chocolate as a health food. Can't argue with that.

Meanwhile, Oxia personal oxygen dispensers from the US have gone on sale in various Asian places, including Singapore, Taiwan and Japan. The information provided with the can says that if you buy the small size, you will get 40 deep breaths and the large size has 70 deep breaths.

You know what? I managed to get quite a few deep breaths absolutely free. I looked at the price tags and noticed they said \$50 and \$70 on them.

Our columnist's website will make you wish you'd stopped breathing: www.vittachi.com.