

## Upholding the rights of indigenous communities

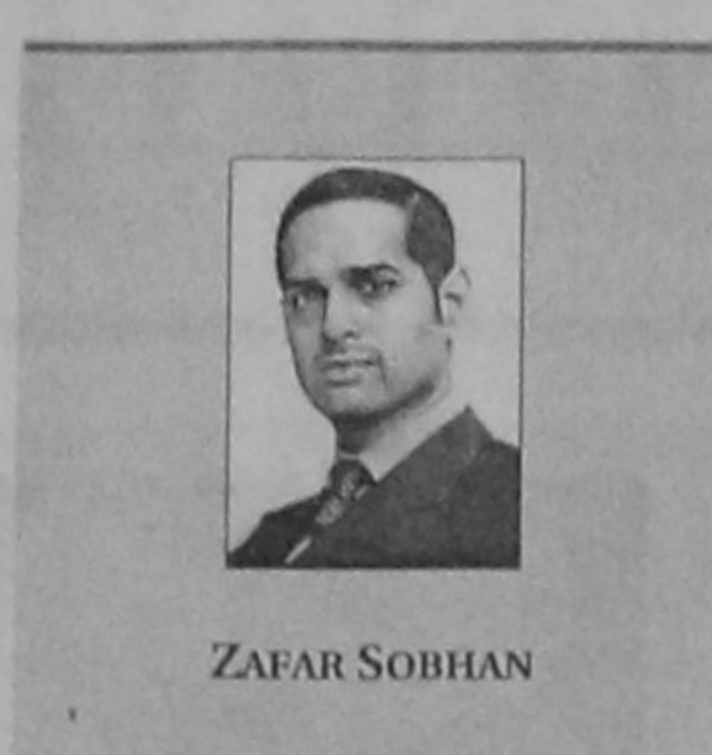
There cannot be any letup in this pursuit

HERE is little question that Bangladesh's indigenous people, like indigenous people elsewhere in the world, must be allowed to enjoy rights enjoyed by other communities across the globe. And that is the idea that has of late been advocated in this country, thanks to the relentless efforts made by conscious sections of the population. We are happy to note that at this point of time, the conditions in which our indigenous communities live and the positive change that ought to come into their lives are a subject that has drawn the attention of broad sections of our society. Evidence of such interest in the well-being of the indigenous communities comes yet once more through the launch of a book on indigenous people on Wednesday. Moreover, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission has been at work, with Britain's Lord Avebury being in Bangladesh at present to get his own perspective on the situation. It is such manifestation of interest that can go a long way toward strengthening the social bonds which unite people of various communities in this country.

We have always maintained that democracy means a system of politics where people exercise primacy. We might add to that and suggest that a sure test of how democracy works or how effectual it is can be gauged through the respect and rights a country accords to its minority groups, be they cultural or political or religious. In these past several years, we are happy to note that institutional efforts have been expended toward providing the indigenous people with the rights they ought to have enjoyed in the first place. The setting up of such institutions as district courts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is a significant instance of how a positive degree of rethinking has come into administration about an issue that can no longer be pushed aside as being of little consequence. And yet, even as we welcome such moves, we realise that problems related to rights to land still inhibit Bangladesh's indigenous communities as they try to create more space for themselves. It is an issue that calls for deft handling, to the satisfaction of the people concerned; and on that will depend the question of how enduring a comprehensive social order we build for ourselves in future.

There are a number of grievances that our indigenous peoples have consistently voiced, for decades. Matters such as developing social forestry and building of eco parks should not be detrimental to the indigenous people's interests and land rights. We can avoid the pitfalls through constantly emphasising the responsibilities we have toward every community in this country.

## Back on the chain gang



ZAFAR SOBHAN

IT started innocuously enough with the first reports trickling in from Kuwait last week. Thousands of Bangladeshi workers had gone on strike and taken to the streets, demonstrating for their rights.

What did they want? The usual. To be paid the amount they had contracted for. To be treated as human beings. To be accommodated in half-way decent conditions. The nation shrugged and turned the page. After all, hadn't we heard the same old story many times over the years?

It wasn't until the first workers began to be deported that we sat up and began to take notice. But seeing the hundreds of returnees, bruised, battered, bandaged, telling tales and bearing physical evidence of shocking abuse has at long last, it seems, pricked our collective conscience.

After all, we already knew, somewhere in the recesses of our minds, how dire things are for our migrant workers. We know that every year some quarter of a million of our fellow countrymen and women join the untold numbers already trying to eke out a

living overseas. We know that they are the lowest of the low, doing the most menial and degrading of jobs. We know that they are routinely cheated, mistreated, abused, beaten, raped.

But we turn a blind eye. We prefer to focus on the doings of our better-educated migrants. The college graduates, the doctors, lawyers, and engineers. When we think of non-resident Bangladeshis, we think of these smart professionals, and hold conferences to discuss how we can leverage their expertise and skills in helping to develop the country.

We look towards India and Pakistan as models of how to integrate our educated and high-earning compatriots and how to attract their investment dollars and give them a seat at the policy table. Now many are returning home and making their presence felt.

But what of our migrant workers? There are over 200,000 Bangladeshis in Kuwait. Hundreds of thousands more in Saudi Arabia and UAE and scattered throughout the Middle East. Similar numbers in Malaysia and Singapore. US, UK, Spain, Italy -- there is no place

that Bangladeshis don't end up.

Many people here in Dhaka have worked hard to focus attention on the plight of our migrant workers. They have written about them, made documentaries about them, conducted research, and held round-table discussions and seminars and conferences.

But it has never been enough. All this attention has apparently never been sufficient to incline any government we have ever had to do much to protect the interests of our migrant workers. Of course, we are perfectly happy to cash the cheques. Remittance earnings are on pace for \$10 billion this fiscal year. We know that the economy would grind to a halt without our migrant workers. For this, they get lip service.

What will it take before we put the rights and security of now literally millions of our fellow countrymen and women at the head of our policy agenda? Maybe the national humiliation that we have suffered in Kuwait will finally incline us to treat the issue with the gravity that it merits.

Let's call a spade a spade. The entire manpower industry is a testimony to our failure. Every year one million Bangladeshis are

added to the job market. The country does not have jobs for them and so as many as one in four are shipped abroad, and we do not inquire too closely into their circumstances as long as the foreign currency continues to flow in return.

Think about this dynamic for a moment. How abject and shameful a dereliction of duty this is. Ultimately our goal must be to eliminate the manpower trade in full. No self-respecting country can countenance its men and women being used as beasts of burden, to do the work that other countries feel is beneath the dignity of their own people. But this seems like a bridge too far for our policy-makers. As population pressure rises and the economy continues to be unable to create sufficient employment for the ever-expanding pool of job-seekers, we are happy to continue to ship our excess labour overseas.

No one can blame the migrants. They know full well how tough it is. Everyone has heard the horror stories, everyone knows of people being cheated and abused and returning home poorer than when they left. But they go anyway, chanc-

ing their lives on the faint hope that they will be one of the lucky ones. After all, what options do they have here?

As long as the manpower trade remains the backbone of the economy and an outlet for millions of otherwise unemployed young men (mostly) and women, we will not be rid of this pernicious business. But the very least we can do is to protect our migrants.

I wonder what it would take for the Ministry of Expatriate's Welfare and Overseas Employment to actually live up to its name. One would have thought that millions of Bangladeshis remitting billions of dollars annually would have been sufficient.

Then there is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which conducts our external relations with the countries where our workers are treated like animals. Perhaps we are scared that if we take a stand that the host countries will no longer wish to take Bangladeshi migrant workers. But is this kind of cringing, race to the bottom approach really the best we can do? Look at the Philippines and how they protect their migrant labour work-force. If the human dimension of the problem leaves you unmoved, consider how much money could be remitted if our workers were not routinely cheated of their contracted salaries. \$10 billion a year could easily be \$15 billion or even \$20 billion.

The problem originates with the manpower agencies who make money off the immiseration of their compatri-

ots. No government has ever taken affirmative steps to rein in the abuses that are rife in the industry, perhaps because the ranks of our parliament and even the cabinet were filled with manpower traders whose financial clout and political influence ensures that the trade stays beyond the purview of meaningful regulation.

All this must change. The trade needs to be brought under strict regulation and scrutiny and those who make their money by exploiting their fellow countrymen and women need to be brought to book. Our embassies abroad and the expatriate welfare ministry need to make migrant workers their number one priority.

Last week the bad news was from Kuwait. Not many months ago it was Bahrain. Before that it was Malaysia. Yesterday it was the Maldives.

How can we look at ourselves in the mirror when we run this country by selling our people into what amounts to indentured servitude. We owe it to the country, to our fellow countrymen and women who toil as migrant workers, and to ourselves to protect each and every Bangladeshi, inside the country and out.

The fact that we depend for our national well-being on supplying cheap labour to be used and abused by the rest of the world and our failure to protect the basic human rights and dignity of these migrant workers shames us all.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## New early warning approach in the offing

Disaster management coming unstuck from obsolete practices

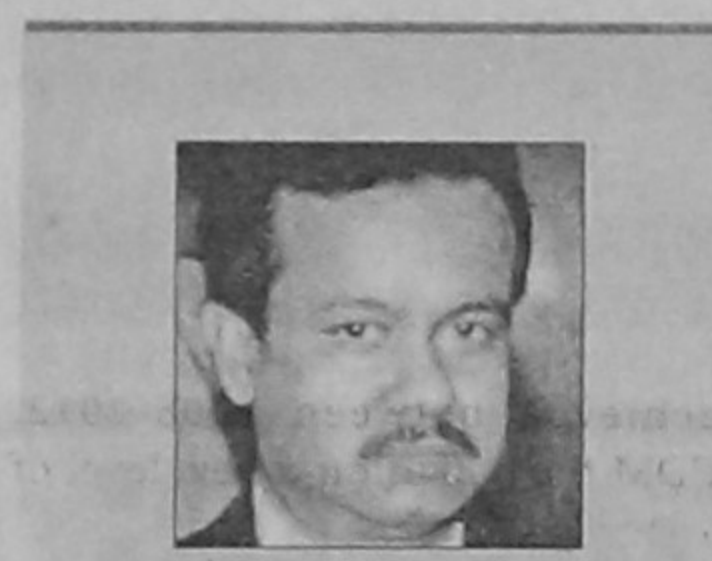
THE colonial, age-old, early warning system, unfortunately still in vogue in our country, has had its focus on safety of ports and river and marine vessels. This is for the first time that the Disaster Management Bureau (DMB), awakened by the huge losses wreaked on human life and property by disasters, is thinking outside the box. It wants to place protection of man, material and means of livelihood at the top of the disaster forecasting and management agenda.

In this effort, the UNDP has come forward to assist the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) adopted by the DMB. At the operative level, the Met office and the flood forecasting authority will have to coordinate with the DMB. The Meteorological Department issues warning signals on the basis of calculated landfall, right and left directions of an imminent cyclone. Signal numbering 10 is hoisted or broadcast indicating the place where the cyclone will have a landfall and course through; to its right the danger signal no 9 and towards the left signal no 8 apply respectively. Such technicalities would be understood by the knowledgeable people, but otherwise, these would have gone over the head of the ordinary citizens. Add to this, the changes in the signalling within a short span that only tended to compromise the state of alert among people, as experienced during the last devastating Sidr. Signals should be limited in number now and, more importantly, people will be warned about the rise of the water-level, the wind speed and the overarching need to move themselves, their cattle head and other handy articles to the safety of shelter homes or other specified elevated places.

In fact, the DMB takes upon itself the responsibility of issuing a package of instructions to people in easily intelligible and doable terms in place of the rather trite and bland statements of forecast and early warning. True, the DMB with its present level of equipment and manpower is hard put to deliver the goods. The modernisation of the disaster preparedness system certainly calls for infusion of logistical inputs; but equally, if not more important, is the need for community involvement.

We already have a model in the cyclone preparedness programme (CPP) with its 40,000 volunteers who relay messages through bicycles, something that has been internationally acclaimed. We must do all it takes to expand the programme vastly in the coastal areas; eventually but sooner than later, we should try and include the urban areas in response to apprehensions held about earthquakes.

## Taking a leaf from Rahul's book



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

I hope it doesn't run the risk of being misunderstood as an Indian sympathiser to say that Rahul Gandhi's visit to Bangladesh was a breath of fresh air. We saw a 38-year-old dapper young man, scion of the longest ruling family in the largest democracy in the world, whose great-grandfather, grandmother, father and mother, all have been the leading lights of Indian politics. It was impressive to know that he was taking interest in poverty alleviation and rural development. So far, our experience has been to the contrary. Young leaders and their cabals of sidekicks have ruthlessly plundered this country.

It was a breath of fresh air for more than one reason. For one, it showed how a Harvard-educated man turned to the call of destiny in the footsteps of his ancestors. It also showed that he was committed to address two of

the most vital issues of his country. Poverty alleviation and rural development lie at the heart of India's challenge in the 21st century. More than 770 million Indians live in the villages, and at least 80% of them have an average daily income of Rs.20, or roughly half a dollar. The future looks bleak. A great majority of them is likely to remain below an income of \$1 per day even after another decade.

As an aspiring leader, Rahul is willing to do what it takes. He flies to remote villages by helicopter and spends time with the huddled masses of India who are struggling to scrape three square meals in a day. It has been reported that he often spends the night in these villages, sleeping in huts and eating with villagers. There's no doubt that he is being groomed for the future. And that future he has been grooming in the rural India.

## CROSS TALK

So, the future leader of India came to see and learn, not business, not politics, but a very special thing. He came to learn how human spirit can be ignited with hope so that it fights to crash over its condition. And he came to us, because inasmuch as we are afflicted by poverty, we are also credited for creating its antidote. Our very own son-of-the-soil Nobel Laureate proclaimed in his Nobel acceptance speech: "We can put poverty in the museum."

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This is where Rahul's visit looms as didactic. It forced us to compare and contrast our own leaders. Horrendous stories have been heard about them, like bats flapping out of dark basements through trapdoors of greed. They stole and amassed wealth with no consideration, either for their country or their people.

In 1958, Jagdish Bhagwati introduced the concept of

immiserising Growth, particularly in connection with international trade. For example, if growth is heavily export biased it will lead to a fall in the terms of trade of the exporting country. It's a situation where economic growth could result in a country being worse off than before.

If anything, our leaders have immiserised us. They have put leadership in the museum, instead of poverty. In fact, what they have done is slightly deviant from what they should have done. They put focus on the pleasure of a few and ignored the wellbeing of many. In the process of alleviating affluence, they have undermined poverty.

I wish these leaders, especially the young ones, were not in jail but in the same room with Rahul Gandhi, conversing on what it means to be a leader and why he must be concerned for rural development and poverty allevi-

ation in the overall interest of the country. It would have been nice if they could compare notes with their guest as to what they learn from their respective elders and how it's more satisfying to uplift people from their miseries than wallow in the wealth snatched from them.

It's often said that a country deserves the leaders it gets. Ours is a country that has become some kind of a showcase for those who are eager to fight poverty, to wrestle their people out of the monstrous grip of a wretchedness that terribly diminishes human dignity. Our leaders should have been eloquent with the greatest mantra of all politics. They could tell rest of the world how ultimate politics could be life transforming, unfettering the hungry and the destitutes from poverty, which is the worst form of slavery.

But Rahul Gandhi's visit has reminded us of the leaders we never had. He reminded us how fortunate we could be only if our young minds in politics, those who were privileged to get both the love and the trust of their people, were grateful enough to serve their country. Yet, what we know about them is alarming. They chose to betray their country. They never showed interest in poverty alleviation or wanted to learn the fundamentals of

rural development. What we have seen is the reflection of adorable faces distorted on carnival mirrors.

If our young leaders ever took overseas trips, they never returned with the knowledge that could be applied for the benefit of this country. They went abroad either to spend or hide their money. They have never thought of poverty alleviation, but of wealth creation, surrounding themselves with free loaders and flunkies.

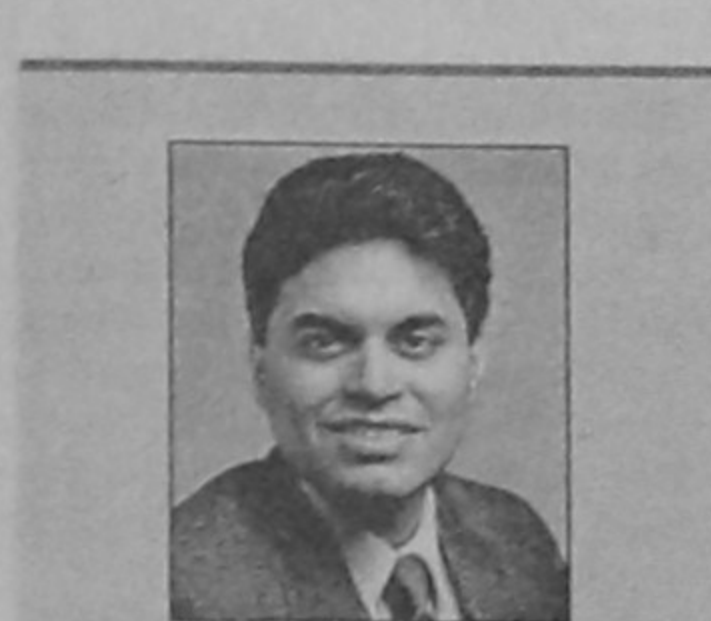
I bet Rahul Gandhi had come to Bangladesh with adequate briefing. I bet he knew all about our leaders in jail and thought about it in his thoughtful moments. He must have tried to understand the whole thing and wondered why he couldn't find politicians of his age who were interested in this country.

In many Western countries, birth control has increased the number of old people and reduced the number of young people. For one last thing, Rahul Gandhi's visit brought us face to face with a grim reality. It's time to cultivate a new crop of leaders, suitable for the 21st century.

This was one visitor who showed us more than he came to see.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star.

## China shouldn't be inscrutable



FAREED ZAKARIA  
writes from Washington

WITH the Beijing Olympics starting at the end of this week, you might think this would be an occasion for serious analysis and reflection about China -- how to understand the country and its changing society, how to handle the regime.

Instead, we've mostly heard a familiar recitation of clichés. Conservatives rail against a "rising autocracy" and exaggerate China's military strength. Republican Sen. Sam Brownback went to Beijing and discovered --

China is a complicated country. It has a closed political system but an open economy and an increasingly vibrant society. It is building up weapons systems at a fast clip, yet is not directly competing against American military power. It has been helpful in the negotiations with North Korea but callous in shielding Robert Mugabe and the Sudanese regime. Capturing these realities is difficult, but still we have to try. To say that this new China is the same as the old (meaning Mao's totalitarian state) is to be ignorant or ideological, or both.

surprise! -- that the Chinese government engaged in espionage.

He fumed to CNN that the authorities could "listen to anybody and everybody and their communications and their recordings." One month earlier, the senator had enthusiastically voted for the FISA Amendments Act, which allows the U.S. government to do pretty much the same thing.

China bashing is not just a right-wing phenomenon. The New Republic, mostly left of center, ran a cover story last month with the headline, "Meet

the new China (same as the old)." Inside, the magazine thundered that "our ultimate solidarity" should lie not with the "odious government" in Beijing but "the billion long-suffering men and women of the world's largest dictatorship."

Except that Chinese people (who, by the way, number 1.3 billion, not 1 billion) seem to disagree. About the same time as The New Republic hit the stands, the Pew Research Center released the findings of its 2008 Global Attitudes Survey.

Of the 24 countries surveyed, the Chinese people expressed the

highest level of support for the direction in which their country was heading, 86 percent. Nearly two out of three said that the Beijing government was doing a good job on issues that mattered to them.

The survey questioned more than 3,212 Chinese, face to face, in 16 dialects across the country. And while Chinese might not always speak freely to pollsters, several indications suggest that these numbers express something real. Such polls have been done for years, and the numbers approving of the Chinese government have risen as the economy

has grown (which should be expected).

Those polled did complain about corruption, environmental degradation and inflation. And these attitudes -- general approval of the country's direction coupled with many specific criticisms -- are also the ones reported by most scholars and journalists who have traveled in China.

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rant or ideological, or both. It is not an accident that many ferocious China bashers have rarely visited the country.

This ignorance of today's China has serious policy consequences. We don't understand how the country works. We don't know what to make of the views of the Chinese people ("our true allies" The New Republic tells us), who are more aggressive than their government on many issues, including Taiwan and Tibet, and who often seem more anti-American.

A recent essay in The New Yorker by Evan Osnos brilliantly captures the complexity of the rise of nationalism in China -- simultaneous Western and anti-Western -- through the eyes of one intellectual, an expert in Western philosophy, who is also the creator of a wildly popular nationalist Web video.

The collapse of the Dohatrade round -- the first breakdown of global trade talks since the 1930s

-- is vivid evidence that we have not found a way to partner with newly rising powers like China and India. If this pattern of misunderstandings, disunity and stalemate continues, there will be little progress on all kinds of urgent global issues -- energy, food, environment, human rights, security.

There is enough blame to go around for the collapse of Doha. The Indians, Chinese and Americans were too obstinate in protecting their farmers. But the United States and Europe have not adjusted to the new balance of power.

The last set of trade talks, in Cancun, was derailed by Brazil. These were blocked largely by India. (Dealing with these democracies has often proved as complex as with the Chinese dictatorship.) Our impulse is to criticise these countries for all their shortcomings, but in fact our goal should be the opposite. We should be making them feel

empowered so they see themselves as rule makers, not free riders on the global system.

The greatest failure of Western foreign policy since the cold war ended has been a sin of omission. We have not pursued a foreign policy toward the world's newly rising powers that aims to create new and enduring relations with them, integrate them into existing structures of power and lay out new rules of the road to secure peace and prosperity.

If the emerging countries grow strong outside the old order, they will freelance and be unwilling to help build a new one. The new world might well be the same as the old -- the 19th-century world, that is, marked by economic globalisation, political nationalism and war.

Fareed Zakaria is Editor of Newsweek International.

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