

'Regional connectivity will make Bangladesh an open country'

Dr. M. Rahmatullah, currently the Policy Adviser for Transport Sector Management Reform of the Planning Commission, is a leading transport and communications expert on trade in port services. He was also the former Director of Transport and Infrastructure Development at UN-ESCAP. **Tawfique Ali** recently spoke with him.

DS: How do you explain opening up of Bangladesh's port facilities to India, Nepal and Bhutan?

MR: It is trading in transport services, making use of spare capacity of the seaports. It is like trading in commodity, as recommended by the World Trade Organization (WTO). It is not leasing out the ports to any country. Bangladesh will handle the total container movement. India will use the ports for her north-eastern states, while Nepal and Bhutan will have an opportunity for exporting and importing goods.

Port service is a resource, like any other natural and human resource or commodity, and Bangladesh will use its spare capacity and earn revenue, with charges for transit, port, road, and rail facilities. The recent joint communiqué issued by the prime ministers of Bangladesh and India has opened up avenues for the use of port services in Bangladesh, which is bogged down with trade deficit and export limitations with India.

How much capacity do Chittagong and Mongla ports have to handle foreign

freights and do business in services?

At present, Bangladesh makes use of only 60 percent and 25 percent of the total capacity of Chittagong and Mongla ports, respectively, as per estimates of the port authorities.

It implies that Bangladesh can sell off the remaining 40 and 75 percent of the services of the two seaports. Chittagong port handles one million 20-foot freight containers per year, of which 70 percent are destined for Dhaka. Bangladesh railway carries only 11 percent of the cargo.

What improvement in quality is required to trade in port service?

The handling of additional foreign freight should be done in a disciplined and organised manner. Port users will not be interested if operations are messy. Bangladesh has to enhance the ports' capacity with efficient management and equipment to make them sustainable. This requires investment in strengthening the infrastructure and capacity building. The private sector may be involved in managing the ports, keeping the author-

ity and ownership in the hands of government.

What are the overall measures that Bangladesh has to take?

Establishing the required transport linkages for freight movement is a big task in making trade viable. We have to carry out a detailed assessment of how much of the port facility and handling capacity is sustainable. We have to ascertain where we need investment for development of assets, management efficiency and training for human resources. Labour discipline is a must to make the ports of international standard to sell its services. Absence of this will just ruin the ports' productivity.

What should be the modes and means of transportation for increased freight movement?

Cargo movement has to depend primarily on the railway if the distance is above 300 km. Truckloads of cargo, getting stuck in congestion, will not do. The existing Dhaka-Chittagong rail link is single-track. It has to be made double-track to carry the enhanced volume of cargo containers.

Bangladesh railways carry only 11 percent of the cargo. The rest is carried in trucks. If the railway carries more it will decrease the load on the roads. Until the railway links are established and capacity is enhanced, Bangladeshi trucks will do the job, for the time being. Two projects are now ongoing, financed by the ADB and WB, to make them double-track.

Should freight movement be through transshipment or transit?

There is no other alternative other than transshipment, at the moment, unless and until direct road and rail links are established for transit. Transshipment is the carrying of goods from the ports to the borders with our own transport. It can start immediately with an assessment of traffic volume. It may be beneficial for Bangladesh, but disadvantageous for port users as it is not cost-effective. The gauge difference in the railway link between two countries also makes transshipment the only way of carrying freight. Transshipment has to be done in sealed-off covered vans, as the Meghna-Gomoti Bridge is not fit for carrying containers.

What are the proposed rail routes for freight movement?

The Chittagong seaport is supposed to serve the north-eastern part of India, comprising the states of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura. Most of the Dhaka-Chittagong railway is single-track. Making it double-track from Chittagong to Akhaura, and then single track, will be good enough for carrying loads to the north-east. The Chittagong-Akhaura-Kulaura-Mahishashan-Karimgonj rail link can be operational with the restoration of the Kulaura-Mahishashan section. The construction of a 14 km Akhaura-Agartola railway link will help to connect to the Chittagong port. The two railway links connecting Nepal with Bangladesh are the Birgonj-Rauxul-Katiyar-Singhabad line and the Parbatipur-Birol-Rdhikapur-Jugabani-Biratnagar line. The railway link through Rohanpur (Bangladesh)-Singhabad (India), Katiyar-Raxaul (Nepal) to Birgonj in Nepal is within 1000 km from Khulna in Bangladesh. There is no railway route for Assam and Meghalaya.

Meanwhile, New Delhi, on January 12, assured Dhaka of the speedy implementation of rail infrastructure upgrade projects for the Rohanpur-Singhabad link from Bangladesh to Nepal through India, and making the Akhaura-Agartola line operational with the construction of a 14 km track.

What are the road routes? How sound are they?

There are three road exit and entry points for the north-east of India -- Akhaura-Agartola, Tamabil-Shilong-Gwahati and Sylhet-Sutarkandi-Karimgonj. The third will be a shortcut for Bangladesh to go to Myanmar. However, the roads we have at present are two-lane, and we cannot allow Indian trucks to run on them because they do not have that capacity, they are heavier and bigger. The existing road infrastructure is structurally very weak, including the Chittagong-Akhaura-Agartola road link. Until it is strengthened, transshipment with our own transport is the option for cargo movement.

Chittagong to Tamabil is the route used for freight movement to and from



Dr. M. Rahmatullah

Assam and Meghalaya (Gwahati and Shilong). Sylhet-Sutarkandi-Karimgonj-Mahishashan is a shortcut route and has to be opened for freight movement to Manipur and Nagaland.

The Mongla-Thimpu connection has only one road route option with a 110 km transit through Indian territory. Burimari-Changrabanda-Joygaon-Phuntsholing-Thimpu is the route to Bhutan. The road link for Bangladesh (Bangladesh)-Fulbari (India)-Kakorbhita (Nepal) to join Kathmandu has a 22 km transit through Indian territory.

A joint venture transport company of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan may be instituted, with dual registration and majority stake belonging to Bangladesh. It will minimise the cost of transshipment; as such, dedicated transport vehicles will ply across the border.

Where can Bangladesh get investment to build road and rail links?

One billion dollars committed by India for Bangladesh will be a source of investment in communications infrastructure development. Another source of investment will be local and foreign private sectors. Investors will profit from the investment over a period of time. Trade in services is a different business.

How can Bangladesh ensure security aspects of such cross-border freight movement?

We will check foreign freight containers with scanners. Chittagong port already has scanners. No government authority can move contraband items across a foreign land.

Goods will move in the containers, or in sealed-off covered vans, and will be subject to customs checking at the time of transshipment. That apart, the water transit route has been in place between India and Bangladesh since 1972, and that has not created any problems yet.

Where else lies the potential for Bangladesh?

There are captive markets for Bangladesh in the north-east of India. If trade and business boost up in the north-east because of the port services, it will open up a larger market for Bangladesh in the

region.

Natural resources and minerals of the North-East and Tripura are under-exploited. Tripura will start exploiting its rubber resource once its gets access to Chittagong port.

It will generate large exports, enhance its purchasing power and draw Bangladeshi products. Port facilities will facilitate the natural resources exploitation in the north-east. Bangladesh can take part in this exploitation of natural resources and industrial development with labour and capital. The north-east will get cement, garments, plastic products and hand tube wells from Bangladesh.

How can Nepal and Bhutan benefit from the port facilities?

Bangladesh has offered port facilities to Nepal and Bhutan for third country trading.

If India agrees, Nepal can take this opportunity to make use of its 22 km transit through Indian territory, and Bhutan its 110 km transit through India.

Nepal uses the Kolkata port for 2 million tons of export-import at present. Bhutan uses it for less than half a million tons of trade. Both volumes of trade are likely to move to the Mongla port, as the Kolkata port is heavily used, congested and suffering from siltation.

The distance to the Mongla port is approximately the same as for the Kolkata port for Nepal and Bhutan.

Can water transit be useful?

BIWTA has built container terminals at Pangaon and Khanpur and will develop a similar facility at Chittagong port. A part of the port containers will move through BIWTA container terminals and a big part by railway. One water transit route between India and Bangladesh is Karimgonj-Bhairab Bazar-Narayanganj-Mongla-Kolkata and the other is Gwahati-Patgaon-Narayanganj-Aricha-Mongla-Kolkata.

What about the Ashugonj port?

India wants Ashugonj as a port of call from Kolkata to carry oversized machinery to set up a power plant in Tripura, using water transport through the given water transit route.

Bangladesh will charge a fee for its Ashugonj-Agartola transshipment service.

What are prospects of the railroad connections for regional connectivity? How can regional connectivity help Bangladesh?

Major routes of the connectivity will be part of the Asian Highway. Regional connectivity will make Bangladesh a well-connected and open country, and facilitate economic integration, greater regional trade and investment. It will encourage neighbouring countries to develop our deep-seaports. Bangladesh alone cannot afford an investment of six billion dollars for our deep-seaports.



Catering to new possibilities.

Where the fault lies

We live within a culture of impunity, cynicism, and arrogance where, ironically, the ability to circumvent the laws is claimed as a hallmark of status and power.

AHRAR AHMAD

WE frequently ask why Bangladeshis ignore laws and policies, intended for the common good, and do not do what they know is right. The issue is really bound up in the political culture we generated over the years and, more pertinently, in our limited concept of democracy, primarily geared towards holding elections. Let me state quite categorically: elections are a necessary condition for democracy, but not a sufficient condition for democracy.

On the one hand, democracy may be considered as a set of practical arrangements to determine "who governs," usually on the basis of some majoritarian principles. On the other hand, it also denotes a political system, which is supposedly committed to some normative ideals. These would include:

- The idea of republicanism -- signifying a government based on the consent of the governed through elected representatives who are responsive and responsible to the people,
- The concept of pluralism -- indicating a commitment to the inclusion of diverse social forces in a spirit of negotiation and respect,
- The belief in the rule of law -- suggesting the supremacy of the constitution and hence, the equality of all people in the eyes of the law,
- The commitment to individualism -- emphasising on essential freedoms to make personal and professional choices, as well as responsibility for one's actions and decisions,
- The concept of transparency -- establishing an open, honest, accessible

and reliable system where the people have a right to know, and the freedom to challenge, and,

- The pursuit of social justice -- building a society based on fairness, equity, and the public good which enhances the quality of life and moral integrity of citizens.

The reason we are unable to advance the welfare of our citizens is because we are so pre-occupied with democracy as a procedure that we blithely ignore democracy as substance.

The Bangladesh "problem" is not about which party is elected through what mechanisms we create, but what political class most of our leaders come from and the behavioural/attitudinal patterns they represent. We live within a culture of impunity, cynicism, and arrogance where, ironically, the ability to circumvent the laws is claimed as a hallmark of status and power. "They" do not have to stand in line. "They" do not have to follow the rules. "They" can get away even with criminal behaviour. "They" are confident that they will never be charged with anything, and if charged, not be convicted, and if convicted, not be punished. If temporarily punished -- usually attributable to the vengefulness of the opposition party -- their political futures will not be affected. Even nearness to people with perceived power is considered a guarantee of some protections and privileges, and so we are forever scrambling to cultivate a network of patron-client relationships through which this becomes possible.

Moreover, there is often a glaring contradiction between the rhetoric

employed by segments of the political classes, and the personal example they set.

For instance:

- Some will speak about the need to preserve the Bangla language and culture with seeming passion, but will send their children to English medium schools (it is not their choice of schools, but their hypocrisy that is problematic);
- Some will grimly warn us about environmental crisis, and skillfully play upon Western guilt (whose culpability, on a global scale, is undeniable), but themselves encroach on public property, pollute our air, plunder our forests, clog our rivers, and engage in reckless construction projects that is turning Dhaka into an urban dystopia;
- Some will engage in finger-wagging self righteousness about the need for moral clarity and ethical commitments, but will have no problems winking their way through the dense thicket of institutionalised graft and corruption (which incidentally, is much more than just bribery);
- Some will decry the politics of confrontation and brinkmanship, but engage in it by lowering the political discourse through mean and shabby personal attacks, employing a bullying, polarising rhetoric, and undermining the parliamentary fully one-third of all parliamentary sessions have been boycotted by the opposition since 1991, as they are currently doing);
- Some will be eloquent in defence of freedom of the press, but attack journalists and file cases against them if their investigations cut awkwardly close to home;
- Some will be passionate about encouraging political constancy and ideological commitment in others, but themselves function in a system of fluid alliances and fungible loyalties, and be chameleon-like in their ability to

change colour and direction depending on convenience and opportunity;

- Some will constantly warn of dark conspiracies against the people, the country, and the leaders, and turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy;
- Some will talk about pride and patriotism, standing tall, and individual autonomy, and may even spout Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire or Edward Said in the process, but will diligently cultivate Western embassies and international agencies in an abject display of a lack of self-esteem, as they pursue the possibility of tangible benefits (trips abroad, invitations to parties with free alcohol, funding opportunities), and psychological security (the endorsement and blessings of foreigners being the typical means through which colonised minds seek to acquire public status and intellectual validation);
- Some will encourage us to make "sacrifices" so that they do not have to make any, and inspire us to dream of a "sonar Bangla" which many of them, obviously, already enjoy;
- Most will seek power, so that we may fear them, but not moral authority so that we may respect them.

There are, of course, courageous, outstanding and exemplary individual exceptions. Yet, generally speaking, we have been complicit in instituting a system of "crony capitalism" through the formation of a "klepto-patrimonial," rent-seeking, predatory state, which has not "failed" but has probably been "struggling" for some time, thanks to their contributions and exertions. In the hands of the same political classes, the country is destined to continue in the same direction, and what administrative changes are instituted, what reforms are envisaged, and what procedures are put in place, will probably matter little. We must ask ourselves whether changes in government mean anything more than shifting the locus of corruption from one bhavan



We must practice democracy, not sit through it.

to the other, and, apart from our relations with India, signal anything more meaningful than a switch in cultural emphases, or a shuffling of private agendas.

If we do not practice democracy in our lives, families, workplaces, political parties, attitudes towards our country and its people, and interactions with each other -- just consider how we neglect to our superiors in dishonest and sycophantic exaggeration, and treat those below us with sneering contempt -- then democracy will only mean elections designed to satisfy our donor communities, and not a commitment to progress and freedom. The problem lies not in our laws, policies, or

institutions, but alas, in us.

As T.S. Eliot had pointed out, between the intention and the act falls the shadow. In our case, that long and crippling shadow is cast by our lack of will and vision, and the perpetuation of a psychosocial environment driven by pettiness, pretension and profit, which jeopardises the very notion of the public good and social capital that democracy implies. Till we recognise the issue, and seek to change ourselves, everything else will seem like a prison exercise.

Ahrar Ahmad is a Professor of Political Science, Black Hills State University, USA. He can be reached at Ahrar.Ahmad@bhsu.edu. This is an edited excerpt from a talk at a conference at Harvard University, organised by DDBF, in October 2009.