

'There is no value in verbal commitments'

Professor Abu Ahmed, an eminent economist and professor in the Dhaka University Economics Department, is also an advisor to the Securities and Exchange Commission, a director of the Chittagong Stock Exchange, and former Pro-Vice Chancellor at Southeast University. In this interview, he spoke with **Porimol Palma**.



Professor Abu Ahmed

from within any infrastructure project. We would be happy if India offered loan for other plans. Also, when we get the loan we will be using it as dictated by India such as for developing railway structure or buying CNG buses. Though it was not mentioned, there is apprehension that these will be purchased from India. Then Indian contractors will be there. So, a good portion of the loan will be in favour of India.

Don't you think we still benefit more now?

We would be benefited more had the connectivity been with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and beyond. Even if we didn't use the, it would be our problem, but still the connectivity would be there. Unfortunately arguing in favour of India probably see the connectivity only between Bangladesh and India. They think it's only Bangladesh who will be creating problems, but they don't see it from an equitable point of view. There should also be a calculation in case we lose our markets to the north eastern parts of India by providing facilities to India to transport its goods to the north east. We have to see whether the connectivity will help our market there or instead face additional competition because of it. I am not saying yes or no. I just think experts should see this independently. My suggestion is let the people in the government talk about it. Because once the prime minister presumes something, others do not dare discuss the matter with her. There should be a commission to conduct thorough studies assessing the cost benefit of transit and connectivity with other countries.

They also should see whether the other issues like maritime boundary, water sharing, and land boundary could be tied to the facilities given by Bangladesh. If we lose in one, others can compensate for it.

Don't you think that the relations between India and Bangladesh got better with the prime minister's visit?

Of course and I want a better relationship with India. They have a lot to provide us with. Being a small country we don't have much to give them. But, strategically, we have something -- location wise and other things. India should pay for us if it wants to take it. Also, India should not consider us at the level of Nepal and Bhutan. Bangladesh is much bigger than those two economies. We are not equal to India, but want equitable treatment.

You apprehended that Bangladesh may lose its market to the north east of India by giving it connectivity. But, some economists say that Bangladesh's export there is very small.

This is a good argument. If that part is developed, the demand will go up. But there should be a serious study done on it if any trade takes place. If you give everything from your basket and do not ask for anything, then you will lose everything. It appears that the government is giving everything, but hasn't gotten anything tangible in return yet.

Say the Tipaimukh dam issue. This Indian government is saying it will not do anything that harms Bangladesh. But, what is the guarantee? The government in India will change and the next government may not say the same thing. But, nothing has been written down. There is no value in verbal commitment.

In addition, when our prime minister went to Delhi, she did not have any discussion on the issues with the opposition or even in the parliament. So many were not able to give quality advice to the PM, which would have facilitated better political decisions.

Bangladesh's garment manufacturers are upbeat about India's \$27 billion apparel market.

Yes, it will be good if we can enter that market. We could export only 4 million pieces of garments out of 8 millions, which were allowed market access at zero duty. This is because non-tariff, para tariffs and other barriers are still there. If India can solve this, it will be very fine. It is even better option than removing some products from India's negative list. India should allow Bangladesh to select the 47 items that should be removed from the negative list.

You mentioned about huge trade gap.
The gap will be there and even increase. But my point is if India exports to Bangladesh products worth \$6 billion and we can increase exports worth \$1 billion from \$400 million, it is a success.

You said by allowing Chittagong and Mongla ports, Bangladesh has lost trump cards. But, don't you think that we can still gain from the deals made with India?

Parts of trump card are still with us. Because we said we would give you port facilities, transit, but the prices are not negotiated. If we can negotiate properly, we can still gain. With good business relations with India, US or Europe would also come forward to invest.

What about the agreement on India's giving 250MW power?

This appears to be a sort of peanut. We need 6,000MW. This will require grid installation that requires a huge cost. The cost of getting power is still not known. If the amount was 500 to 600MW, it could be possible. I am not opposing it, but appropriate pricing should be there. The other thing I would insist is the movement of human being. We have manpower, but unfortunately India is strict about it. They can simplify the issuance of visa and look at it liberally. Not all Bangladeshis sell drugs only.

The Daily Star: How do you assess the prime minister's recent visit to India?

Abu Ahmed: Looking at it from the economic point of view, I can okay all the facilities offered to India, provided that India pays it back. Say for transit, whether it is using our own vehicles or Indian ones, we should make decisions on the pricing and ask what in particular makes up that price.

In addition, we should ask about the economic cost involved. Economic cost is different from what our transport system is paying for, because our system is subsidised. It was built by the taxpayers' money, but the government spends the money that doesn't reflect on the cost of borrowing. Had it been in the private sector, built up by taking loans from other sources at the market rate, you would have to calculate the full market cost and not the cost you are charging for your own transport.

But, that issue is yet to be discussed, no?
There was no dialogue but my apprehension is that Bangladesh missed out on some good deals while negotiating with foreign companies.

I would suggest that when you work out the details you should take into consideration as to whether port capacity is enough and as well as who will be bearing the cost of building additional capacity? Also ask whether that will be built by taking loan from India or through grant. These things could have been solved through a grant. After all, you are giving some strategic asset to be used by a big neighbour who hasn't provided you with too much. Had the neighbour given you enough, you could give him this and that. We are exporting goods of only around

\$400 millions to India, whereas their export is \$4 billion dollars. In addition, they are opening company branches here. Some of them are PLCs like Marico. Many of them are just branches.

We should make sure that these foreign companies are incorporated locally, so that our people can have a share part of their equity. When the relationship comes between Bangladesh and India, it should come in totality.

We can also do better in the Indian markets provided Indian bureaucracy is not tied hard. You see, 8 million pieces of garments were allowed for Indian market tax free, unfortunately only half of that amount could be exported. This is because there were some other taxes locally. These things should be negotiated. India promised to remove 47 products from its negative list, but we do not know what those are. If the products do not have comparative advantage, this offer makes no sense. Here Bangladesh should be given the option to select the items.

Another way to look into pricing is that when India uses 6,000 kilometres of roads to carry goods to Tripura through Assam, there should be a cost for that. Bangladesh has the right to ask for an additional price. For India's benefit, it would save them time. If they disagree with the demanded price, they can simply refuse to use our territories.

What do you think about our \$1 billion debt to India?

This is a big loan but my point is that Bangladesh doesn't need loans. We already have \$10 billion in Bangladesh Bank. Bangladesh can finance



Road rage

Driving in Bangladesh is becoming a battle for survival, with drivers who either lack proper training, have no legal license, or suffers from road rage that is perhaps unparalleled to anywhere else.

NASIM FIRDAUS

My son was taking a turn when a car from behind hit his car. The driver still continued to drive through the maze of cars, rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and pedestrians. In that maze it was not too difficult for my son to turn around and follow the car that hit him. Soon he was able to stop the car and get the driver to inspect the damage incurred due to this "accident". To my son's amazement, the driver in the other car was a young teenager, who was learning to drive from his incompetent driver, during the city's peak rush hour traffic. The teenager was blissfully unaware of the damage he could have caused not only to the car and its passengers, but also to his own life. My son, after giving this young driver a good piece of his mind, let him go only because of a previous incident that both he and I had watched from the safety of our apartment a few weeks ago.

In that incident, a black sedan was running for its life from a mad crowd. It couldn't go far. Perhaps for want of a better thing to do, the agitated-without-cause unruly crowd attacked the vehicle, smashing its windshields, glass panes, and the hard steel with whatever they could find. Audio speakers were torn out and carried away by one enterprising man in a rickshaw, while other "body parts" were dismembered with extraordinary dexterity. The mayhem continued until the police arrived half an hour later, from a distance of just two blocks. By then, the car was totaled beyond recognition. The young driver, who had apparently lost control of his vehicle, hit a rickshaw before being chased.

Fortunately, he and his companion were safely removed from the vehicle by some miracle. A few days after this incident, I witnessed a victim of a hit and run accident on Manik Mia Avenue, where a young man lay on the road with his lunch box still hanging from his shoulder and glass from the windshield of the car scattered around. Blood began to ooze from his ears.

Driving in Bangladesh is becoming a battle for survival, with drivers who either lack proper training, have no legal license, or suffer from road rage that is perhaps unparalleled to anywhere else. Perhaps, most of these "raged" drivers are men who have little care for the lives of others, and have an inflated confidence about their driving ability. Yet, when it's time to make judgment calls, they falter and recklessly hit vehicles, pedestrians and anything else that may stand in their way. In the process, valuable and innocent lives are lost leaving behind a host of mourners without recourse.

This road rage must be stopped. The onus to stop it lies not only with the authorities who issue driving license and those who make random checks on the drivers, but also on the hired drivers and those who hire them. A foolproof mechanism must be adapted, to ensure that driving licenses are not made available to all and sundry. Tests of different driving techniques, as well as different faculties such as ability to read and understand road signs, strength of eyesight, etc. must be made mandatory. Genuine driving licenses should be made temper-proof.

All new drivers should, as a mandatory practice, have to appear for tests at regular intervals to check their understanding of the basics of driving as well as road courtesy for a period of up to three years. All agencies connected with cars and roads, including those selling vehicles, providing insurance and other related services, must join forces to educate and raise awareness of the dangers of road rage and incompetent driving. Finally, those who hire drivers must be more vigilant in keeping their drivers under reign. The best recourse perhaps would be to engage more women drivers who are naturally inclined to being on the cautious side and to have owners drive their own cars.

Authorities could perhaps declare a few innovative ideas to make roads safer and encourage owners to drive their own vehicles. One day in the week could be declared as only women driven day when no vehicle, with the exception of male owner driven, could ply on the road. Women would drive all heavy vehicles plying the roads on that day. This will enhance employment of more women drivers, encourage them to claim ownership of the roads along with their male counterparts, and help in mainstreaming women in the development process. That way, accidents from wayward drivers could perhaps be reigned in. The rest of the world has women drivers on the road, why not us?

Nasim Firdaus is a former Ambassador.



Let our roads connect us to all of South Asia, not India alone.

IN MEMORIAM

The scholar that was A.R. Mallick

In free Bangladesh, it was Mallick's task to preside over the ministry of education as its first secretary. Never having been a bureaucrat, he ought to have felt out of place. The surprise is that he did not and in fact he brought an intellectual flair to the job.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THIRTEEN years ago, the death of Azizur Rahman Mallick drew the curtain over a scholar's life. He was one of those men whose singular devotion to the country, which devotion came encapsulated in his efforts for better education for the young, has always been the pivot around which his life and with it its achievements have been measured. You think of Chittagong University and in the same breath you dwell on the place of Azizur Rahman Mallick in its history. Back in the later 1960s, as the university took shape, Abdul Monem Khan, governor of what was then Pakistan's eastern province, made it known that Mallick was not an individual he could appreciate. But then, Monem Khan saw little that was of significance in Bengali culture. It was one of those times when an upholding of the so-called Pakistan ideology was all that mattered to Monem Khan and the likes of him. And yet, for all his difficulty in coming to terms with Mallick's scholarly persona, the governor knew there was no one who could steer Chittagong University to the future better than the man behind its creation.

When you look back on the career that Dr. A.R. Mallick built steadily and passionately over a long period of time (and the passion was all over his preoccupation with education),

you realise that his was an era that has passed. The values which once underscored the social construct in our clime have in these past many years become blurred, to a point where the idealism associated with academia appears to have gone missing somewhere and somehow. It is the realities of today which serve us as a reminder, in that rather incongruous way, of the principles of yesterday. The scholar in Mallick came forth with such intellectual attainments as the pretty seminal British Policies and the Muslims of Bengal. Of course, there have been his detractors where the theme covered in the work is concerned. But from his perspective, Mallick opens a window to our understanding of the vagaries of fortune and the twists of human action Bengal went through in the colonial era.

And then, like so many others, Azizur Rahman Mallick went through a necessary evolution of his individuality and his worldview. The state of Pakistan, it is safe to suggest, propelled leading Bengalis in the 1960s into a transformation of their political thoughts, all of which converged at a point where Bengali nationalism showed signs of sprouting and then expanding outward as an indestructible force. In the War of Liberation, Mallick's was one of the leading voices in the Bengali intellectual tent, desperate about getting Bangladesh's message

out to the wider world beyond the refugee camps and the fields of war. There were others doing similar work --- Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, Rehman Sobhan, A.M.A. Muhiith, Amirul Islam, M.R. Siddiqui, indeed a whole tribe determined to provide substance to the cause. Mallick was part of the charmed circle.

In free Bangladesh, it was Mallick's task to preside over the ministry of education as its first secretary. Never having been a bureaucrat, he ought to have felt out of place. The surprise is that he did not and in fact he brought an intellectual flair to the job. But perhaps one of the crowning achievements in Mallick's career was his stint as Bangladesh's first high commissioner to India. It was a decision that came from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. And it had profound implications for the new nation. Here was a scholar going out to speak for his country, in much the same way that John Kenneth Galbraith had once spoken for America and Krishna Menon had once served as India's voice in the West. Mallick's presence in Delhi added urbanity and intellectual substance to Bangladesh's diplomacy. It is a pity that after him, no government has thought it necessary to repeat the pattern.

A challenging moment came for A.R. Mallick when he was asked to replace the iconic Tajuddin Ahmed as finance minister in late 1974. He met that challenge bravely and right up to Bangabandhu's assassination in August of the following year he proved adept in handling a ministry on which rested the economic hopes of a beleaguered country.

Read Mallick's Amar Jibon Katha O Bangladesh Mukti Sangram. It is a testament to the best and the worst of times we have lived through. He speaks of his dreams and the fulfil-



Azizur Rahman Mallick

ment of his aspirations. He dwells on the men he has had interaction with, the observations resting upon the degree of insight that only a scholar can lay claim to. Mallick exuded humour in as much as he brought gravitas to bear on a study of the world around him.

It is time to recall the scholar in Azizur Rahman Mallick. His was a generation whose ideals we still hold dear, for those ideals continue to speak to us of old-fashioned values.

(The thirteenth death anniversary of Dr. A.R. Mallick, academic, diplomat and cabinet minister was observed on February 4).

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