

Is n-plant answer to electricity crisis?

Some thoughts on recent discussions

Why not proceed slowly, consider alternatives such as renewables -- which will take about the same time-frame to mature -- grow internal nuclear technical capabilities, whittle down the culture of non-transparency, inculcate a culture of safety, and wait for more modern and safer nuclear technology to come on line?

AHMED BADRUZZAMAN

RECENTLY, there has been renewed interest in nuclear power in Bangladesh. This is understandable in view of the electricity crisis the country faces. An agreement has been signed with Russia for a 1,000 MWe plant. A roundtable on the issue was organised by The Daily Star, which also wrote an editorial on it. Others have commented on it too.

Unfortunately, these discussions mostly restate well-known positions by proponents and opponents of nuclear power, without significant added substance and often without the questions one must ask. Nuclear power offers cer-

tain advantages, such as CO₂-free electricity like solar power but needs base-loading which the solar cannot provide. A well-run plant can run for 40 years and in the US some plants have been given extensions to a 60-year life.

But going for a nuclear power now cannot address the current electricity crisis in Bangladesh any time soon. It would take five to ten years to build a nuclear plant. While the nominal cost is cited to be \$1.5 billion, I will not be surprised if it goes to over \$3 billion.

The nuclear plant being built in Finland by French company Areva is about two years and several billion dollars behind schedule. Some estimate that a 1,000 MWe nuclear plant in the US may

cost about \$6-7 billion.

Yes, a Russian plant could be less expensive but I am not sure how the Russians can build a plant only at a fraction of that cost, and that too with modern safety features which are a must to prevent what happened at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 or at Chernobyl in the former USSR in 1986. Can Bangladesh afford the likely high cost, the associated uncertainty, and the risks?

A nuclear accident in a densely populated country like Bangladesh will be catastrophic. A standard nuclear plant in the US requires a 10-mile exclusion radius to protect the population. Will we have this luxury in Bangladesh?

There is new nuclear technology, which is inherently safer, that the West is considering. The core will not melt and the exclusion radius will be less than 500 metres. Why not wait for that to come on line instead of going with antiquated technology, that too in a country not exactly known for its safety record?

On the other hand, the concern about nuclear waste is unlikely to be a big issue for Bangladesh if the country supplying the fuel takes back the highly radioactive

spent fuel. The US, in its GNEP program to help other countries to develop nuclear power, is proposing to do just that.

Does Russia have such a programme? Bangladesh needs to find out. At one time the former USSR had such a program with some Eastern European countries to which they supplied nuclear plants. There

is allegation that they used it as a bargaining chip in political disputes.

However, my concern about nuclear power in Bangladesh is more than technology and more than the source country. It is about the lack of a culture of transparency and safety in Bangladesh itself that makes dealing with an unforgiving tech-

nology such as nuclear extremely risky. Can these be overcome? Yes, but given the culture of corruption and confrontation that exists currently, it will take a long time.

Yes, Bangladesh needs to consider nuclear power, but with care and within reason -- points the current discussions generally do not make clear, unfortunately. Why not proceed slowly, consider alternatives such as renewables -- which will take about the same time-frame to mature -- grow internal nuclear technical capabilities, whittle down the culture of non-transparency, inculcate a culture of safety, and wait for more modern and safer nuclear technology to come on line?

Why the rush to start something which is unlikely to come on line anytime soon, and that too using antiquated, not-so-safe technology, which would likely cost too much?



A modern nuclear power plant: How safe and affordable?

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(The comments are entirely his own and are not intended to reflect those of his employer or of organisations he is affiliated with.)

Regional cooperation for development

The case of Bangladesh and India

Some outstanding issues which have surfaced over the years, and whose resolution can make the breakthrough real to herald a new beginning, are sharing of the water of the common rivers, maritime boundary delimitation, cross-border issues and trade imbalances.

M. SHAH ALAM

AN established opinion in the economic and political-economic circles around the world, substantiated by worldwide practice, is that regional economic cooperation and its higher form, economic integration, has become a major contributing factor of development in the individual countries.

Unfortunately, not all the regions have been equally able to explore and exploit this potential. Prominent amongst them is South Asia. Saarc efforts so far have not proved very successful.

The Indian sub-continent, more known as South Asia, has historically been a distinct geographical unit, sharing many common historical, economic, social, cultural and administrative experiences.

Partition in 1947 not only disrupted the shared development of the region but also planted seeds of distrust and discord amongst the nations of the region, creating a formidable barrier in the way of their healthy development.

Notably, more intimately located and closely connected sub-regions are also identifiable within the greater South Asian region. One is Bangladesh with her closely located eastern, western and northern neighbours -- the seven-sister

states of India, West Bengal, Nepal and Bhutan.

Perennial rivalry between India and Pakistan since partition in 1947, often graduating into enmity, has deprived this region and many sub-regions within it of substantial benefits of economic cooperation. Creation of Bangladesh in 1971 provided a fresh opportunity to Bangladesh and India to avail of the potential benefits of intimate regional and sub-regional cooperation.

However, post-Liberation War difficulties in Bangladesh visibly delayed the process of any planned and prospective long-term cooperation strategy. Later, the August 1975 incidents drastically changed the scenario.

If South Asia presents a unique geographical unit with so many things to share and with potential to derive benefits from economic cooperation or integration, lack or absence of cooperation would deprive the smaller rather than the bigger states of the region. India, with two-thirds of the territory of the region, is unlikely to feel the pangs of partition or of a fragmented sub-continent the way her neighbours would.

Post-August 1975 political developments in Bangladesh seriously undermined the prospects of effective economic cooperation with India, especially the sub-regional potential for growth in

the East. Actually, this region in undivided India was well-off thanks to diversified economic activities based on very developed rail, road and river communication networks supported by three developed sea ports in the area.

Modern technologies combined with close cooperation between the two countries could have transformed this network into a great vehicle to pool the resources of the region for great economic strides forwards.

For more than two decades after '75, successive governments in Bangladesh pursued a policy of distancing from India and avoided any policy that would clear the way for economic cooperation to fully exploit the region's economic potentials.

India is a big country. She has many options, which she has used and is using to make up for the gap created with the neighbours. She is shaping to be a world economic power.

Our options are limited. We need to understand our geographical realities and constraints. We need relatively more regional cooperation.

Any wide ranging connectivity and communication network, understood to be the engine of modern economy, means communication and economic cooperation with India, which is virtually our sole neighbour -- bordering us on all sides except the small land tract with Myanmar and the Bay in the South.

Wrongly and unfortunately, ideology and politics of the parties in power in Bangladesh after '75 wanted to keep India away, fearing that Indian influence would be a threat to their ideology and politics. An entire generation grew up in Bangladesh under the influence of this politics.

It has blinded us from seeing the simple logic of regional cooperation and development. When a political party

with a different ideology and politics came to power in 1996, it found that it was not strong enough to reverse the trend, because Bangladesh-India bilateral relations and people's perceptions had by then acquired a set pattern.

Although India made great contributions and sacrifices in our Liberation War, the legacy of pre-'71 Indo-Pak relations conditioned many of the perceptions and attitudes as well as left-over issues, including Farakka, which made the neighbours cautious in their approach.

Nonetheless, the ground was being prepared for effective cooperation between the two Liberation War-time allies, showing immense promise and perspective, when the tragedy of August '75 struck.

Predominantly religion-based Pakistani type politics of the ruling parties in Bangladesh after '75, devoid of the ideology and spirit of the Liberation War, in other words the mildly and carefully orchestrated anti-Indianism, made India a factor of domestic politics in Bangladesh. Resultantly, India became irritated and suspicious, which was clearly manifest in her activities, policies and attitudes towards her Eastern neighbour -- that further damaged the prospect of meaningful cooperation.

It will only be at our own peril if we do not accept the geopolitical realities of the region and take India into confidence, and go for all forms of connectivity that are necessary for our economic gains. We need to understand that India is mature enough to understand that an economically strong Bangladesh would not be damaging to India, rather it would also safeguard India's interests.

Whatever government comes to power in Bangladesh, it would be naïve to think of realising our full economic potentials without taking our big neighbour into confidence.

In a sense, a breakthrough may have been made by the Bangladesh prime minister's India visit last January.

But the present government has compulsions and constraints, which need to be appreciated by India. The opposition in Bangladesh, which was in power most of the time after '75 and responsible for the distancing-from-India policy, has indirectly warned the government against a policy of close cooperation with India. They claim a sizeable following in the country.

It is now highly desirable that India, as a much bigger, richer and mature neighbour, understands the realities, takes concrete steps -- more than what would be normally expected of a neighbouring partner -- and earns the confidence of the people of Bangladesh.

Some outstanding issues which have surfaced over the years, and whose resolution can make the breakthrough real to herald a new beginning, are sharing of the water of the common rivers, maritime boundary delimitation, cross-border issues and trade imbalances.

India made sacrifices in our Liberation War; more sacrifices and understanding are necessary under new circumstances to make for the past lapses and lost opportunities. An economically stronger India as well as an economically stronger Bangladesh would best protect each other's interests.

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Regional leaders at the fifteenth Saarc summit: Cooperation needed.

Entrepreneurship needs a boost

People in all sectors of the society and belonging to all shades of opinion see joint ventures with western and fast-developing Asian firms as a panacea for revitalising our stagnating economy. That calls for ensuring a climate for investment in the country.

MD.ASADULLAH KHAN

MUCH of the country's fast growing population is without job or business. Creation of job opportunities appears to be a remote possibility. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

(BBS) survey report, "Monitoring of Employment Survey -2009," painted a grim picture of the unemployment situation.

The report indicated that the number of jobless in the country increased to 27 lakh in the last three years, and the under-employed figure climbing up to 1.54 crore during the same period. The country lags far behind other Asian countries when it comes to fostering entrepreneurship.

Few in the country have much appetite for risk, as a consequence they are much more likely to seek any job. But, as compe-

tion is getting tough with each passing day, the government must push its citizens to be entrepreneurial. Our people are often likened to ostriches, whereas dynamic people of Singapore and Hong Kong are working like high-flying storks

Allocation of government funds to small entrepreneurs trying to get off the ground should start without further delay. With the improvement of power generation capacity, small industries set up all over Bangladesh can create jobs for the unemployed. Agencies working under the government must target the export-driven sectors.

The government and affluent people should boost personal initiative in people looking for confidence, co-operation and funds. People can be provided entrepreneurial support in the industry, such as repairing and tool making, now booming in the Dolaikhal and Kamrangirchar areas

of Dhaka city. Singapore made \$1.34 billion available to young entrepreneurs in 1991 to encourage them to go ahead with their own ventures.

The people are grumbling about the administration's inaction and apathy to their needs, and this undoubtedly has muddled up relations between the two groups. The root cause of most of the crimes can be attributed to inequitable distribution of wealth and poverty of the general masses.

One can note how Dirubhai Ambani, a Gujarat-born entrepreneur, rocketed to success.

He became one of the richest people in the world because the projects he undertook were all oriented towards national prosperity.

In our country, a good number of engineers cashed in on policy decisions and made a great debut in ready-made garment export and industrial production. Bangladeshi garment exports ranked top in the Asian region in the years 1990-98.

Towfique Seraj of Sheltech, S.M. Kamaluddin of Concord, Tanveerul Haque Probab of Building for Future, Rabiul Alam of Energypac, Shafiqur Rahman of Megatech engineering firm, all of them engineers and successful

entrepreneurs, did not bribe their way to the top.

Engr. Shafiqur Rahman, a bright product of BUET in the early '70s, left a comfortable job in KSB pumps and started a high pressure pump manufacturing company on his own, and it can now meet the growing demand for irrigation, domestic and commercial water supply system without the installation of an overhead reservoir.

The sewage treatment plant installed at NSU (North South University) by Megatech Engineering firm is a significant achievement with regard to recycling of waste water and utilisation of natural fertiliser for gardening in individual houses.

As already mentioned, what is important for the budding entrepreneurs to learn and what Ambani said years ago is worth noting. He said: "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." A successful entrepreneur, Ambani followed this dictum as he diversified his business from textile to advertising, merchant banking, petrochemicals to oil-refinery and now to cell phone industry.

In all countries and in all ages, supporting the ventures of new entrepreneurs has helped foster business, industry and wealth. The case of billionaire and Media

Mogul Robert Maxwell is a reminder of how a person with entrepreneurial skill, ambition, and lofty desires can reach excellent heights all alone.

Steiner, a 43-year old Hungarian engineer is a person whose works can inspire our people looking for opportunity, dynamism and market. Starting in 1981 Steiner built a backyard refrigerator repair-shop into an aggressive, sophisticated firm that is now poised for new growth. His Rolitron company has diversified into water purifiers and dhomo-dialysis machines.

Starting as a small enterprise in the early 80s, Energypac of Bangladesh is now engaged in designing, manufacturing and marketing of high technology electrical products and services related to power generation, transmission and distribution, as well as execution of turnkey projects in other countries. This firm now exports its manufactured equipment to some Asian and African countries other than India.

The history of Rolitron in Hungary or Reliance in India or Energypac, or Square Group or Pran Group or Otobi in Bangladesh illustrates the problems that private enterprises in all countries have been facing.

Entrepreneurs in our country have to

navigate through the thicket of red tape, inattention, and neglect, and race from one place to another. People have to wrestle with endless annoyances that make life horrible here.

But these budding talents, rich in innovative ideas, technical expertise and bubbling with the spirit of doing something that helps them and the country, have hardly got recognition at the proper moment. These people, it must be admitted, have a major challenge to meet to build up the economic bridges to the West and other Asian countries that will guarantee the hard-won freedom.

People in all sectors of the society and belonging to all shades of opinion see joint ventures with western and fast-developing Asian firms as a panacea for revitalising our stagnating economy. That calls for ensuring a climate for investment in the country.

With the government making a big allocation of Tk.3,000 crore in PPP programs in the the upcoming budget, it is expected that a substantial amount will be earmarked to induct new entrepreneurs waiting in the wings with novel projects.

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