

Let's go beyond borders

The World Bank reckons that GDP growth of Bangladesh will jump by two percentage points if the country can optimise the use of its unique geographical position and exploit the opportunities of regional integration fully.

ANAM A. CHOUDHURY

RIGHT ideas often prove difficult to apply in practice. The India-Bangladesh \$1 billion landmark agreement will entail a win-win situation for both the countries. Transit and connectivity shouldn't be held hostage to politics of competitive populism. Although the Awami League-led grand coalition is apparently at ease with India, some of our right-wing politicians stoke anti-Indian hysteria and spread stories deliberately to make people frightened about the neighbour.

Many people mistakenly believe that offering transit facilities to India is akin to compromising our territorial integrity. Cynics think that any plus for India is a minus for Bangladesh. The danger is that ordinary people are likely to listen to the wrong stories only. We should not forget that as the lowest riparian country, we need help and cooperation of India and Nepal to improve our water resource management for protecting our country from devastating flood and severe drought.

Nevertheless, given the way the political wind is blowing, the country's political energy lies with the Awami League. Ideologically, they are better positioned to expand their base and reach out to the people and convince them that Bangladesh could gain significantly by allowing transit and transshipment facilities to our regional trading partners. We

must not allow any party or individuals to sabotage its implementation.

Our policy makers need to foster superior political-economic models for meeting the modern world's challenges, and guide the nation into the trade, commerce and industries of the future. Too often, leaders of Third World countries find that no matter how good their ideas, they don't make much of a difference if a system isn't in place to move decisions to delivery.

The government should set specific, reachable and timely goals instead of promising ridiculously unattainable ones. Our politicians know very well the price they pay for their inflated rhetoric, and they have shown time and again their willingness to pay that price. Saying what the majority of voters want to hear should not be enough to win the elections. Peace and prosperity favours the incumbent. Good governance and sustained economic growth often dismiss anti-incumbency sentiment.

Nobody likes being poor or hungry. People want to know that things really will change, and they also want assurance that the ruling party itself has changed and can address the needs of the nation's lower classes, fight corruption and ensure the welfare of the people.

The present government, with such a strong mandate, should be able to make the decisions that a nation needs to promote regional cooperation and development to survive in today's high-speed



Connectivity unlocking progress.

globalised world. In accordance with the terms of the Indian credit, the government can spur economic development by creating the context for growth with a big infrastructure programme to build more roads and railways.

Our roads and highways are woefully inadequate, which really limits our growth. Private investors are hesitant about putting money in infrastructure because government regulators are not independent enough of populist politicians to guarantee a long-term decent return.

By focusing subsidies and tax credits on these key sectors, Bangladesh can lure foreign toll road builders and toll road operators to construct highways and expressways connecting our seaports and major cities, and help transform Bangladesh into a transit hub of this region.

The railway is edging back into favour in many countries. In much of Europe, high-speed train has already supplemented air travel. China is constructing 16,000 kilometers of high-speed rail network linking all its major cities. India

plans to double the size of its high-speed rail network. Nowadays, people love to enjoy the comfort and efficiency of super fast rail travel. By constructing a couple of hundred miles of high-speed rail network, Bangladesh can effectively link most of its major cities and seaports and connect with Trans-Asian railway network.

Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Nepal still remain the least integrated countries in Asia in terms of free trade, transportation of goods and services and road and rail links. The World Bank and

the ADB have long been trying to make such integration effective and are eager to provide necessary technical and financial support to implement such projects efficiently.

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Across Asia, the primary engine of growth has always been the market, not the state. The true source of growth in most Asian countries is exports -- manufactured by private companies and sold to consumers around the world. Our government should try to create the right environment and harness the investment potential of the private sector to stimulate growth and create jobs.

Even in China, the government is gradually getting out of the way and allowing private enterprises to thrive. In January this year, a free trade agreement between Beijing and Asean came into full effect, creating a free trade zone of a couple of billion potential customers. How can we join such free trade zones without developing road and rail links to these countries?

This government rode into office on a vast wave of progressive enthusiasm, and nobody wants this enthusiasm to be followed by disappointment. Progressive and enlightened people of this country maintain that the Awami League may not be the party of their dreams, but the alternatives are definitely not the stuff of their liking. Now it is time to cleanse and rejuvenate the nation and sweep terrorists and extremists out of its territory.

Anam A. Choudhury is a former investment banker.

Bring on the good news

In a way, the media is poised to play the most important part in this regard in days to come. And if it does not balance out its coverage of what is rotten with a serious effort at covering what is brilliant, the powerful media faces the danger of being counted among the rotten, despite its brilliant capability and good intentions.

JALEES HAZIR

THE unprecedented floods in the country have provided us an insight into all that is brilliant and rotten in the state of Pakistan. As we provide relief to millions of our fellow citizens struck in the midst of the calamity and brace up to rebuild the ruins that the furious rivers have left behind, this insight could be very useful.

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The newspapers and private television channels have been vigilant about exposing the criminal negligence of those in positions of power and projecting the miserable condition of people hit

by the disaster, but they have failed to give due coverage to the positive side of the story and the scale and strength of the public response.

There have been some scattered stories of the armed forces doing a good job, but other than that one hardly comes across any coverage of the many heroic initiatives undertaken by ordinary citizens and charitable organisations that need to be told and retold in the media. The media must understand this part of its responsibility.

The idea is not to go soft on the serious shortcomings of the political leadership and the extended paraphernalia of bureaucracy, who stand naked in their ineptness and lack of sincerity. They deserve to be lambasted and taken to task for their shameful failure and lack of credibility, a job that the conscientious reporters and anchor-persons are performing well.

But it would help things tremendously if, for every fake camp that is exposed

on television, something positive like the efforts of a young team of volunteer doctors is also covered and given projection. Why has the hyperactive media not found the time to accompany some of the innumerable trucks of relief goods organised by citizens and brought across the compassion and zeal of those who are organising these efforts?

Everyone I meet is involved in some way in coming to the help of the flood victims. Young and old, the rich and the not-so-rich, they are all contributing in one form or another. Even friends living abroad are making efforts to develop linkages with the relief efforts.

If people are not raising funds they are at least contributing to them, students and professionals, the young and the not-so-young volunteers are personally taking relief goods to the affected areas and distributing them either independently or in association with some local organisation.

Philanthropic trusts and associations, whatever their area of concern, have joined in. The volunteers and groups are coordinating among themselves to achieve the best results. Unfortunately, this huge relief effort, which is a strong sign of hope, is hidden from the wide-open eye of the media.

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Day for women against repression

Where is the security of the common man when the custodian of law becomes the offender? Through the execution of the verdict, the rights of women have been established at least in some degree. Let us wage a united struggle against repression of women.

MAHMUDA HUSAIN

AUGUST 24 is observed as the Resistance Day For Repression Against Women, which has been observed since 1996.

Yeasmin Akhter was only fourteen years old. She was gang-raped by policemen and later killed. She was a domestic worker in Dhaka. Because she wanted to see her mother, she left her employer's home without telling them. She caught a bus to Dinajpur and got down at Dashmile bus stop before dawn on August 24, 1995.

A police patrol van was driving by, and one of the policemen said to the tea stall owner: "We are law-enforcers, we will drop her home safely. Don't you have faith in us?" Hours later, a young boy discovered her body off the main road. The dead girl was the same girl who had been picked up by the police van.

When this news spread, a large number of people took out a procession.

Spontaneous processions and rallies took place, demanding that the policemen should be tried.

Yeasmin's mother recognised her daughter from a newspaper photo taken as she lay lifeless in an open three-wheel van.

As a people's movement emerged, police action was brutal. Lathi-charge followed by firing killed seven local people. Public outrage swelled. The police station was besieged, and the arrested processionists were freed from police lock-up by members of the public.

The Yeasmin case was entrusted to senior S.P. Afzal Hossain. He accused eight persons and filed a case against them. The principal accused were S.I. Mainul Islam, Sepoy Abdus Sattar and driver Amritlal Barmon. Other accused included S.P. Abdul Motaleb, S.I. Mahtab Hossain, S.I. Sawpan Kumar Chakrabarty, S.I. Matiur Rahman and S.I. Jahangir Alam. Fifty-four witnesses were examined in the case.

The proceedings of the case started

on September 21 in 1996 at Dinajpur District and Session Judge's court. After prayer from the accused the case was transferred to Rangpur District and Session Judge's court.

In the charge sheet it was stated that three of the accused raped Yeasmin, strangled her to death, and fled from the place of occurrence. On such grounds, a case under the Women and Child Repression Act was filed against them. On August 31, 1997, the verdict was issued in this sensational case by the session judge of Rangpur, Md. Abdul Matin. He convicted three accused policemen to life sentence.

On September 1, 2004, seven years after the pronouncement of the verdict, the convicts S.I. Mainul Islam and Sepoy Abdus Sattar were hanged. Driver Amritlal Barman was hanged on September 28, 2004. This is the first time in the history of this part of the subcontinent that policemen were executed.

Where is the security of the common man when the custodian of law becomes the offender? Through the execution of the verdict, the rights of women have been established at least in some degree.

Let us wage a united struggle against repression of women.

Mahmuda Husain is a human rights and women's rights activist and Member, Gender Trainers Core Group.

Who are indigenous?

According to the UN definition, indigenous peoples are descendents of the original inhabitants in a given territory who have been reduced to minority status due to invasion, conquest, colonisation, settlement and other means by the people coming from overseas.

ADITYA KUMAR DEWAN

A debate has emerged among government officials, journalists, academics and politicians on the question of indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. They argue that the current ethnic groups living in the CHT are not indigenous. They claim that they came from somewhere else, mainly pointing to Arakan of Myanmar.

According to the UN definition, indigenous peoples are descendents of the original inhabitants in a given territory who have been reduced to minority status due to invasion, conquest, colonisation, settlement and other means by the people coming from overseas. This definition is applicable only to the indigenous peoples living in Australia, New

Zealand, the Pacific Rim Islands, and North and South America (also called NewWorld).

This definition is not directly applicable to the indigenous peoples living in developing countries. Due to this reason, the Chinese and the Indian governments for example refused to accept this definition. They argue that we are all indigenous to our land and we have not come from overseas or conquered the people. They maintain that they have ethnic groups called tribal people, scheduled tribes, national minorities, etc.

Because of this definitional limitation and scope, the United Nations has drafted a second definition of indigenous peoples applicable to the indigenous peoples living in developing coun-

tries.

Three criteria are used to identify the indigenous peoples: (1) the people who live in relatively isolated regions from the mainstream population; (2) they have been able to preserve their language, culture and identity without much impact from the outside world due to their relative isolation; and (3) finally, they are not familiar with state structures such as police, administration, courts, army or modern market system. Basically, they are kin-based societies who mostly owe allegiance to their lineage chiefs, clan chiefs and tribal chiefs where power is not centralised and lacks coercive power.

Thus, the CHT ethnic groups are indigenous peoples in the CHT from the point of view of the second definition of the UN. They were previously relatively isolated for a long time from the mainstream Bengali population of Bangladesh (though not at present). They have been able to maintain their distinct cultural and ethnic identity because of their relative isolation from the people living in the plains of Bangladesh. All socio-economic and

political relationships within a group (also between the groups) are based on kinship. And finally, all three chiefs in the CHT carried out their socio-economic and political functions through their lineage chiefs and clan chiefs.

No one knows who had first lived in the CHT because of the absence of recorded (both written and archaeological) evidence. We primarily have oral traditions through legends and stories describing migrations, inter-tribal feuding, raids and expeditions. The written history of non-western societies, including the indigenous peoples, often starts with the history of European colonisation of the non-European world. During colonisation period, the colonial administrators, missionaries, traders, adventurers left vivid impressions on the colonial subject population.

We find documented records on the CHT region from the old colonial documents and descriptions left by colonial administrators such as T.H. Lewin and other European writers. The colonial records show that the CHT was populated by a dozen indigenous groups, who had distinctive cultures, languages and

identities.

The region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts appeared on the first map of Bengal made by Joao Baptista Lavanha in about 1550. The map shows a settlement called Chacomas in the area inhabited by one of the indigenous groups now known as the Chakmas as early as the sixteenth century (Willem van Schendel, Wolfgang Mey & Aditya Kumar Dewan. *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland*. Bangkok: White Lotus press. 2000).

Therefore, the CHT ethnic groups can claim that they are the indigenous inhabitants of the CHT and no non-indigenous people had ever lived in the CHT before them. The non-indigenous people began to settle in the CHT only from the beginning of colonial administration, not before 1860 when the CHT was created as a separate district (within greater Bengal) with the status of an excluded area.

The recent emergence of this debate is more political and ideological to deny the obligation of the government to recognise the rights of indigenous peoples in the CHT. The Bangladesh government most

recently identified the CHT ethnic groups and other indigenous groups in Bangladesh as "*Chotta Nrigosti*" (small nationalities), not indigenous groups. Some academics and journalists also refused to call them indigenous and many attempts have been made to distort the real history of the CHT.

There are hidden objectives behind all these denials to keep the indigenous people marginalised. They fear that the use of the term "indigenous people" may oblige the government to recognise and respect the rights of people the CHT in accordance with the UN definition of rights of the Indigenous peoples.

Today, indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are not passive, as their backs are against the wall. They are campaigning at the national and international level by using the media, holding protest demonstrations around the world, court challenges, and making alliances with national and international human rights organisations.

Excerpted from the forthcoming book "*Between Ashes and Hope: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism*" (published by Dristhitpat Writers' Collective; with support from Manusher Jonno Foundation).