

Migration with dignity

More efforts needed to improve this sector

As the chair of the Colombo Process, an alliance of 11 Asia labour exporters, Bangladesh is now in a position to initiate serious dialogue to bring about some urgently needed changes in the whole process of manpower export. Bangladesh has today around 70 lakh workers abroad and collectively they send around 10 billion dollars to Bangladesh. Both the number and especially the repatriated amount clearly show the importance we need to attach in this area.

Though the government and the minister need to be felicitated for some of the useful work that BMET has done, especially in the area of compensation for defrauded workers, still the nexus between our bad apples and those in the receiving countries who work in tandem to cheat our migrant workers continues to thrive.

Breaking this nexus can be an urgent task before the Colombo Process countries. Bangladesh and others can insist on the labour receiving countries to adopt or at least adhere to the norms of the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers. To do so however Bangladesh will have to ratify it herself, though we have signed it sometime ago.

We commend the government for planning to use the multilateral process to promote a common stance on minimum wage ceiling, protecting workers rights in the host country and reducing cost of sending workers. As the chair, we are in an effective position to lead the 11 Asia countries from where 2.5 million people leave every year to work abroad. Surely as exporting countries we have both moral and legal responsibility to look after them within international law. The meeting of the Global Forum on Migration and Development to be held in Mexico in November is an ideal occasion for Asian countries to take a common stance and put up an united face to the world.

However while the multilateral process is essential, there are some vital steps that we need to take internally. The most important one is skills training. "Migration with Dignity", the theme of the fourth ministerial meeting to be held in Dhaka in April 2011, can most effectively be achieved by value adding to the productivity of our workers. The motivation is not all altruistic as estimates show we can easily raise our remittance to 15-20 billion dollars with skills training as they fetch higher wages. The obvious area for us is para-nurse, nurse and semi skilled jobs. Even for domestic help, rudimentary English and some basic training on operating household implements like washing machine, microwave, refrigerator, etc. can qualify our workers for higher pay.

A better domestic regulatory framework and its roper and quick implementation is an urgent need. Too many of our workers are still being too shabbily treated and exploited. Here we suggest a dialogue with our manpower exporters and encouraging them, through incentive both financial and otherwise, to weed out the rotten apples within them. There is enough profit in the trade without having to exploit the workers.

Strengthening the capacity of our Embassies, specially in Middle East, Singapore and Malaysia and training our officers to be genuinely worker friendly would greatly ameliorate the present sad situation.

In conclusion we need to expand our labour exporting market by finding out newer ones. We also must engage more effectively with the recipient countries to provide better working conditions for our workers. Bangladesh can dramatically better her growth prospects by promoting, protecting and training our migrant workers. We are not really exploring our potential here.

Combating hunger needs a comprehensive policy intervention

Cannot bask in the glory of statistics

WE could perhaps take some comfort from the recently published report by the UK based ActionAid International that credits Bangladesh with high marks for improving on last year's performance in combating hunger. We have moved several notches up among the most vulnerable 28 countries in reducing hunger this year. And we have done better than the other South Asian countries in this regard, no mean task by any standard. If it is any comfort we have managed to bring down the number of hungry to 26 percent from 36 since 1990.

However, those are statistics that on the face of it are indeed gratifying but we cannot overlook the fact, thinking outside mere figures and numbers and looking at the reality on ground, that in real terms 26 percent constitute a very large number of people that go hungry to bed, that is those who can afford a bed at all, every day, and with the yearly population growth the actual number of hungry accretes over the years. About 65 million people do not have enough food and the matter is compounded by the huge number of malnourished children in the country, the highest in South Asia.

While more fortunate countries than us can do by merely walking fast to keep pace with the problem of hunger we have to sprint in order to attain the same result. But it also means reconciling certain facts in our planning matrix. While much of the effort to combat hunger is essentially a function of distribution and availability of food it is also a function of capability, more exactly, enhancing the vulnerable and the marginal groups' capability to purchase food.

It will not do by merely providing food under special schemes to vulnerable groups at a particular time of the year every year. While that is, and will perhaps continue to be a major expedient to address the vulnerable groups' requirements, the long term solution will have to take into account the related issue of poverty and hunger and proceed on a twin track process to eradicate the situation.

While the price of food grains must remain within the purchasing power of all, the government must ensure that the farmers get remunerative prices for their produce. A balance must be struck between the two as those who are on safety net received training, education and skill to enter the economic cycle.

Also, given that our harvests are hampered either by lack of rain or unseasonal rain, not to speak of the possible shortfall in grain output by 3.9 percent every year due to the effect of climate change, the need for long-term and comprehensive policy to address the problem of hunger in Bangladesh is even more acute.



Celebrating Pahela Baishakh: Optimistic about the future.

Basket case no more

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A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

"BANGLADESH, 'basket case' no more" is the heading of an article by Sadanand Dhume in *The Wall Street Journal* of September 29 (reprinted in *The Daily Star* on Oct. 1). The article has special significance for us, as Dhume provided some useful insights into the development of Bangladesh and compared it with Pakistan. He wrote: "Pakistan could learn about economic growth and confronting terrorism from its former eastern province."

Henry Kissinger, the former US foreign secretary, dubbed Bangladesh as a "bottomless basket" some time after its independence. For the outside world, much of the country's history is summed up as a blur of political unrest and natural disasters punctuated by poverty and the violence of the religious extremists, and occasional military coups.

But these are not all about the country. There are some positives that discerning eyes cannot fail to see. Bangladesh has made positive strides in child mortality, education, life expectancy, women empowerment and rural development. Literacy rates have increased remarkably though the quality of education is yet to be improved. Bangladesh is now considered as a role model, especially for the South Asia's other Muslim-majority countries.

Dhume observed that no two countries

in the region share as much in common as Bangladesh and Pakistan, two wings of the same country between 1947 and 1971. In respect of population, they are the world's sixth and seventh most populous countries. Both have alternated between civilian and military rule.

But when it comes to government, policies and national identity, the two countries diverge sharply. As a percentage of GDP, Islamabad spends more on its soldiers than on its school teachers, Dhaka does the opposite. In foreign policy, Pakistan seeks to subdue Afghanistan and wrest control of Indian Kashmir. Bangladesh prefers cooperation to confrontation with its neighbours.

At a reception for world leaders attending the United Nations General Assembly in New York, President Barack Obama congratulated Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for Bangladesh's achievements in attaining UN-set MDGs, which earned the country the special UN award for reducing child mortality rate in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh was one of six countries in Asia and Africa feted for progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals, a set of targets that seek to eradicate extreme poverty and boost health, education and the status of women worldwide by 2015.

Many may argue that the US is pampering Bangladesh because it wants Bangladesh's army in Afghanistan. The US

administration requested the participation of the Bangladesh army in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban. But the country has refused the US proposal.

Bangladesh is ranked fourth in the global apparel exports and grabbed 3% market share, according to a recent World Trade Organisation (WTO) report. It has secured the fourth position in terms of value, followed by China, EU-27 countries and Turkey.

According to the report, which was prepared on the basis of export data of 2007 of the respective countries, China exported apparel items worth \$115 billion, EU-27 countries \$103.40 billion, Turkey \$14 billion and Bangladesh more than \$10 billion.

Bangladesh was the largest exporter of cotton T-shirts and second for cotton pullover and jeans exports to European countries in 2009. In terms of volume, the country was the second largest exporter of cotton trousers to the US last year. The readymade garment industry of Bangladesh is a genuine story of success. It is amazing that a non-cotton producing country has achieved such a big success.

The latest data from the Export Promotion Bureau said Bangladesh fetched \$12.59 billion from garment exports last fiscal year, and contributed around 80% to national exports. Last year, Bangladesh also explored some new export destinations such as Japan, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and some countries of South America.

The Global Peace Index (GPI), which was drawn up by the Institute for Economics and Peace, an independent think tank, along with the UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit, placed Bangladesh 86th, ahead of India (107th), Sri Lanka (125th), Myanmar (126th), Pakistan (127th) and Afghanistan (137th), among 140 countries.

The Happy Planet Index prepared by the UK-based New Economics

Foundation in 2006, rated Bangladesh as the happiest nation in the world. The study based on the link between personal spending power and perceived quality of life concluded that money could buy everything but happiness.

The sensational finding of the survey was that people in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, derive far more happiness from their small income than the people in most rich countries including UK, Austria, Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan and Canada.

Bangladesh is not only striving for peace within its border but has also demonstrated its resolve to keep peace beyond borders, where internal conflicts and civil wars have made peace volatile. The country now has the second largest contingent of peacekeepers from the UN member states deployed in the trouble spots of 15 countries across the world.

Despite being a least developed country (LDC) in the economic parameter, Bangladesh has steadily improved life expectancy, education and standard of living, and had moved into the category of medium developed countries in the HDI from 2003.

Bangladesh was one of the lowest ranked in the world in terms of access to proper sanitation in its rural areas some 10 years ago, and has targeted achieving nationwide sanitation coverage by 2010.

Bangladesh's position, ahead of all other countries in the region, as a nation of peace is no surprise, given that it has no stakes and involvement in activities like arms sales, conflict with neighbours and foreign troop deployment, which have rendered many powerful countries less peaceful. Yet, the country needs to do a lot with a view to contributing to global peace more meaningfully.

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China makes Chinese; Indians make India

Imperceptibly, but indelibly, the map of India is now crowded with dozens of germinal points that make great labour migrations unnecessary. The future is in cities like Kochi or Aurangabad or Barmer: in less than a decade Barmer will rival Jaipur, and within the foreseeable future become the second or third heart of Rajasthan.

M.J. AKBAR

WHEN does a small town grow up and become a big boy? Does size matter? Geography is a peculiar addiction. Fat makes you large, possibly very large, but it does not make you strong. Some nations have a quarter of their population herded in slums extending in myriad directions because they have not created the capacity to build more cities.

America's strength does not lie in New York and Washington but in the fact that Microsoft can be born in Seattle and the world's software industry is controlled from a desert in California.

India was weak as long as its strength lay in the traditional four great cities: Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. These urban sprawls became sores instead of cities as the poor flocked toward them, driven by unrealistic hopes. It is only logical that all four were British cities.

Chennai was seeded by an English

adventurer who wanted to live within riding distance of his local girl friend; Mumbai harbour came as part of the dowry of Charles II and was then rented by the British monarch to the East India Company. Job Charnock founded Kolkata on a marsh because better points to the north along the Hooghly river were taken by European merchants who had arrived earlier. You might think of Delhi as a Mughal city, and so it was; but every bit of Delhi was razed to the ground by a vengeful Company after the uprising of 1857, and modern Delhi is a British invention with only a whiff of its glorious history. The great capitals of Indian India, Lucknow or Mysore or Patna or Jaipur, stagnated or decayed during the British Raj.

Modern India is rebuilding itself along its old centres of economic and political power, even as it lifts unknown one-street inhabitations into industrial hubs that are, to use a well-known phrase, the marvel of our age. Jamshedji Tata provided the template with Jamshedpur;

Jawaharlal Nehru used state resources to create more steel cities. It was Dhirubhai Ambani who took the imaginative leap forward into the private sector ecopolis; the economic conglomerate around which Indians could create a new future.

Imperceptibly, but indelibly, the map of India is now crowded with dozens of germinal points that make great labour migrations unnecessary. The future is in cities like Kochi or Aurangabad or Barmer: in less than a decade Barmer will rival Jaipur, and within the foreseeable future become the second or third heart of Rajasthan.

It is this India which is crashing through the glass ceilings of our social and economic history. It has turned Marxism on its head; instead of seizing from the rich in order to give to the poor, it is churning out its own cream. It is driven by a passion to improve the individual self, but knows that this is impossible without changing the collective well-being.

It is not socialist, and indeed might be suffering from generosity-deficit when it comes to those at the lowest levels of our tragically tiered social order. But it is social-democratic, in a European rather than American fashion, willing to tolerate positive discrimination even if it grumbles relentlessly while doing so. The grumble is human; but tolerance comes from the fact that it has itself benefited from reservation policies.

It is this Indian who has swarmed across the medal podiums of the Commonwealth Games. Sport is a signifi-

cant route to recognition as well as economic upsurge. The story of the farmer who could not enter the stadium to watch his wrestler son win a medal because of his unfamiliarity with the big city and its projects, and the contempt which police have for the poor, is both saddening and luminous. That unfortunate father will get over his hurt; pride in the son's glory has changed his life already.

These athletes, including the many who did not win medals but learnt to compete, were not manufactured in some state factory machine, as in China; they are champions of free will, as well as champions through free will. China's achievements will be vulnerable to the contradictions inevitable within a state-dominated matrix; the idealism of Marx and Lenin could not prevent such contradictions from eroding its successes.

Individualism makes Indian achievement more chaotic, but it is also the bedrock strength that will carry it further. China irons its dangerous creases once every fifty years; we do so as we go along, perhaps leaving the collar rumpled as we get the rest of the shirt right. The possibility of turmoil is far less in the second model. This is not to make a value judgement; one merely records an ongoing reality. Chroniclers do not always know how the chronicle will end, but we still have to do our reporting.

China makes the Chinese. Indians make India. Give me the second option any day.

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