

## Dhaka-Delhi deal on border trade

*The move could lead to wider economic cooperation*

THE initialing of two agreements by Bangladesh and India on border trading is clearly a move in the right direction. And it is because it hints at the many possibilities which in time could be opened up in trade and by extension through greater cooperation in other areas between the two countries. It is in such a perspective that we observe the decision to open the two border haats or markets in Sunamganj and Kurigram. An important point about the opening of these haats is that the agreements do away with the difficulties which have traditionally been part of border trade. Now, with trucks from both countries entering each other's territory with goods and going all the way up to the warehouses on each side of the frontier, the problem of frequent and irksome loading and unloading at the border has been removed. The two haats are thus to be considered a necessary first step in a further liberalising of trade, through an inauguration of similar haats, along the long border that Bangladesh and India happen to share.

The move, coming in light of the deal reached between Delhi and Dhaka during the Bangladesh prime minister's visit to India last January, is a clear recognition of the economic imperatives which are beginning to define relations between and among states in South Asia. Obviously, there are the several political issues that have over a stretch of time clouded the prospects of cooperation in the region, but with such deals as the one on India-Bangladesh open border trade, it is quite conceivable that economic exigencies will in future lead to a serious search for solutions to political issues. The opening of the two haats in question allows for trade in thirteen items that include locally grown agricultural goods and locally manufactured finished products. That is a good beginning, and it gives us hope that a wider dimension will in time define the nature and quantity of the goods that will be traded between the two sides. A most encouraging aspect of the deal is that trading in the thirteen items will be conducted through the currencies of the two countries and will be duty free. And for us in Bangladesh, the good news is that India has agreed to export cotton to us for the first time since April. With the price of cotton going up in the international market, this move on Delhi's part will obviously be a matter of relief for business circles in Dhaka.

There is little question that Bangladesh needs to diversify its exports to the outside world if it is to build a safe and secure economic base for itself. Where trade with India is concerned, we still happen to import more Indian goods than export Bangladeshi goods to Delhi. It is an issue that will exercise minds in this country. And yet it will be fair to suggest that the deal reached in Delhi on the haats in Sunamganj and Kurigram is a positive opening. Let this move be the beginning of a new, more cooperative and mutually beneficial era in economic relations between India and Bangladesh.

## Welcome "daily sun"

*Let it add sparkle to the profession*

AS is customary for us, we welcome every new entrant to the print media world. We have done so for every newspaper on its arrival, particularly the English ones, and we do the same most heartily to the Daily Sun that has joined the fraternity yesterday with the promise of giving its readers something new.

It is very heartening to see more and more investments in the print media and we are greatly encouraged by the fact that we are seeing more and more newspapers hitting the stands. That we hope will make for not only healthy but also hearty journalism.

But with the good news is associated the rather disappointing aspect, that of the quality of journalism, to be more specific, the issue that vexes us in the industry is the deficit of ethics in our collective professional demeanor as journalists and newspapermen. We are sure we speak for the entire fraternity when we say that we are impeded by the absence, in certain cases, of strict moral standards in our work. It hardly needs to be stressed that the need to keep to the highest principled standards in order to reach the lofty pedestal should never be lost on us, because, from such moral standing can we be convincing and acceptable to the readers.

What is heartening for us is the fact that, not only are the readers far wiser than we care to credit them with but are also more perspicuous and critical and seldom go wrong in their analysis of the performance of the print media. It is therefore for us, the media, to not only understand the mind of the readers and their requirement for honesty and clarity, but also to keep abreast with the public mood that is often selective in its choice. And thus the acute need for transparency and honesty in our conduct if the newspapers wish to establish credibility amongst, and acceptability of, the readers. It will be well for us to remember that at the end of the day the public will easily see through the motives that guide each newspaper, and will make their choices as they deem fit.

We extend our heartiest congratulations to the Daily Sun and all those associated with it and wish them luck in the venture that they have embarked upon with the promise of new things for its readers. Our best wishes will always be with those who enhance the ethical standard of our journalism.

## Reaching children below poverty line

The families that have the guarantee for at least two square meals a day have the potential to treat their children better. And, once given necessary awareness and orientation, these families can send their children to school and ensure them of their other rights.

SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

AMID every discourse on economic growth and development, the nagging issue of poverty pops up stubbornly. The stuff of Third World reporting in the international media -- malnourished, starving and disease-stricken men, women and children with sunken cheeks and their rib cage jutting out of the skin that covers it -- typically epitomises poverty in general.

The UN-declared Millennium Development Goals (MDG) also target poverty reduction as the thrust of its programmes. And just before the global financial crunch set in, the world's richest nations sounded very optimistic about ridding the world of the curse of poverty once and for all through making huge investments in the poverty-prone countries of Africa and other parts of the globe. But that trumpet blowing against global poverty, however, ended in a whimper with the onslaught of economic meltdown.

However, the usual voice against poverty, the UN, is still audible, and it has been religiously expressing its concern, carrying out campaigns and coming out periodically with reports on the status of this oldest enemy of humanity.

A children-specific organ of the UN, Unicef, for example, has recently published such a report on the poverty situation in Bangladesh focusing on children. It says that some 30 million children of Bangladesh live below the poverty line. Below the poverty line means their condition is poorer than those who are termed poor according to general defini-

tion. The official definition of poverty line before 2008, however, was an earning amounting of roughly \$1 a day. But the World Bank in 2008 revised the definition of poverty line at \$1.25 a day, which is based on 2005's purchasing power parity (PPP).

Now what about the Bangladeshi children whom Unicef defines as living below the poverty line? The Unicef survey further shows that 64% of Bangladeshi children, who comprise 45% of the population, have no access to sanitation, while 41% of them have no home to live in. Worse still, 35% of the country's children go half-fed every day. But that is about condition of the children who belong to the households of the poor. And that is, of course, not the real picture of those who are not just poor, but are less than that.

Unicef's recommendations on improving the condition of the poverty-ridden children stress providing public sector investment for the children. But how can the government fund reach the children reduced to such subhuman, in some cases, inhuman conditions? Children deprived of shelter are exposed to the most violent aspects of society. They are exploited and abused by all the wolves this discriminatory society harbours.

The luckier among these children may have some employment where they may get some pay for subsistence. But there, too, they are exploited and abused. In the worst-case scenario, they are usually subjected to the condition of slavery in its different forms. So, it is unlikely that the government's largesse for the children will ever find its way to that dungeon of darkness.



Normally, children are best accessed for assistance at their homes. And in that case, we are talking about the families where the children were born and are being brought up. The government assistance for children in that case should cover the families of those children through income generation of their parents.

There are, however, special programmes for children who have no home. Children are treated humanely with sufficient food to eat, clothes to wear and facilities for medicare. Such centres to rehabilitate homeless children even have programmes to provide them with basic education and training them in different vocations. But still these are the fringe areas of society and are far removed from the core that controls the dynamics that begets poverty and with it the children who are deprived of all the rights to grow as a normal human being.

So, the ideal way to improve the condition of the deprived children is to help the families to get out of poverty. Lack of awareness is undoubtedly a big stumbling block in the way of their development and growth. But the information that can make them aware can hardly reach the person whose only concern is to survive today,

knowing nothing of what may happen to her or him tomorrow.

The families that have the guarantee for at least two square meals a day have the potential to treat their children better. And, once given necessary awareness and orientation, these families can send their children to school and ensure them of their other rights.

The concern of the UN or the government about poverty is one thing and addressing it properly is another. The international and local agencies working to attack the problem of poverty look at it from outside. They focus more on symptoms than the cause.

However, short of going to the socio-economic roots of poverty, all attempts at tackling it is like seeing the proverbial elephant by four blind Indians. Even then, global concern about poverty and its reflection on our particular context is better than no attention to the problem at all. And for the less privileged children to be covered by these anti-poverty programmes, the government, the NGOs, and the international agencies should focus more at the social core of poverty than at its fringes.

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## Doomed before it starts?

The Valley's moderates as well as extremists have dismissed the panel as a non-starter. Indian parties, from the Left to the Right, are disappointed that it excludes politicians, who should lead it. Their unanimous opinion is that the Centre is not serious about finding a Kashmir solution.

PRAFUL BIDWAI

WHEN the Cabinet Committee on Security announced "a new political initiative" on Jammu and Kashmir on September 25, it was expected that high-level interlocutors would soon begin a dialogue with the state's parties and civil society.

The appointment of the interlocutors' panel was considered the only novel, and most important, feature of the official 8-point plan of action. It was also the logical follow-up to the all-parties delegation's September 20-21 visit to J&K, itself remarkable.

However, the announcement of three panellists -- journalist Dileep Padgaonkar, conflict resolution academic Radha Kumar, and Information Commissioner M.M. Ansari -- has attracted widespread criticism, anger and ridicule.

To many, it represents a desperate anxiety to pretend -- just before President Obama's visit to India -- that the government is sincerely grappling with the Kashmir issue.

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excludes politicians, who should lead it. Their unanimous opinion is that the Centre is not serious about finding a Kashmir solution.

There is no support for the panel from political, civil society or intellectual opinion, not even the ruling Congress. Apparently, the government first approached Congress leaders Digvijay Singh (a heavyweight who mentors Rahul Gandhi), Prithviraj Chavan (close to the prime minister) and Salman Khurshid (by virtue of being a Muslim?) to join/head the panel.

They refused. Hence the present "Team B" panel, without a proper chair with cabinet rank.

Given this hostile reception, no senior politician is likely to agree to head the panel. His/her authority would already be dented by the absence of a chance to choose the other members.

How did the hope of September dissipate into the disappointment of October? All three nominees are political lightweights. None conveys gravitas or incisive grasp of Kashmir.

Ms. Kumar ventured in 2006 into making suggestions for governance structures from the bottom-up. But they wrongly presume India and Pakistan have already

agreed to "soft borders." Her conservative pro-Western reputation further weakens her acceptability.

Mr. Padgaonkar isn't distinguished for his grasp of Kashmir or out-of-the-box solutions. Mr. Ansari is a non-entity, unacquainted with J&K.

Several candidates, with superior understanding, experience and acceptability, come to mind, including Chief Information Commissioner Wajahat Habibullah, an Indian Administrative Service officer of the J&K cadre. He's so highly regarded in the Valley that when he had a near-fatal accident some years ago, thousands prayed for him.

There are also eminent Kashmiris, including educationist Agha Ashraf Ali, economist Haseeb Drabu and vice-chancellor of the Islamic University of Science and Technology Siddiq Wahid.

Among the all-parties team politicians who visited Kashmir, two made a particularly favourable impression: the Communist Party (Marxist)'s Sitaram Yechury and Ram Bilas Paswan. Mr. Yechury grasped the nettle by knocking on hardline leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani's door. Mr. Paswan visited the grieving family of Tufail Ahmad Mattoo, the 17-year-old, whose killing in June sparked a wave of protests.

As for the Valley's politicians, it would have been eminently wise to associate people like Yasin Malik and CPM MLA Yusuf Tarigami with the panel.

But it's more important to focus on the panel's mandate than on individuals. A democratic government should have initiated the broadest possible consultation on the mandate to generate the contours of a feasible solution. This alone can adequately clarify the interlocutors' task and enable them to prepare for conciliation.

Yet, the government, in its usual imperial style, consulted nobody -- not even those involved for years in the civil society dialogue with Kashmiris, nor key individuals engaged in back-channel diplomacy with Pakistan, which by all accounts had almost yielded fruit by 2007.

Instead, it thoughtlessly nominated the three panellists and entrusted them with "the responsibility of undertaking a sustained dialogue with the people of J&K to understand their problems and chart a course for the future."

Nothing suggests that the panel will "understand" the "problems" through a

few desultory visits to Kashmir and that it's better placed to suggest a way forward than dozens of recent civil society initiatives. It's not easy to instill confidence among Kashmir's widely divergent actors and produce worthy, consensual and practical solutions.

In all probability, key groups in the Valley will boycott the panel. Kashmir is indeed the burial ground of countless attempts at mediation.

In constituting the interlocutors' panel the way it did, the government is making two blunders. First, the present team patently lacks New Delhi's confidence and a mandate to negotiate a deal -- unlike the few past instances of successful reconciliation in Kashmir, like the defusing of the Hazratbal crisis of 1963 (caused by the alleged theft of a relic of the Holy Prophet) or the Indira Gandhi-Sheikh Abdullah accord of 1975.

Second, there's no indication that the Centre intends to treat the Kashmir issue qualitatively differently from other current or past separatist insurgencies like those involving the Nagas, Mizos, Bodos and other Northeastern groups, to whom it has been talking.

The Kashmir problem is unlike any other because of its international dimensions and a long history of alienation of the Valley's population from the Indian state, which has violated Article 370 of its own Constitution. Military repression of the azaadi movement further aggravated matters after 1989. Pakistan cynically fished in the troubled waters.

Although the 2006 Assembly elections and the 2009 Parliamentary elections restored a degree of normality in J&K, the Centre failed to use it to promote conciliation.

The outbreak of the stone-pelters' protest in June was another ominous warning against New Delhi's complacency -- and an injunction to correct course. But the state substituted the all-parties delegation visit -- and now, the interlocutors' team -- for strategy.

The interlocutors could spread yet more despair, cynicism and anger in the Valley, obstructing a real solution. The Centre should go back to basics: wide consultation, formulation of a broad-framework solution, exploration of areas of agreement, and find interlocutors who carry authority and political credibility.

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