

Tipaimukh: A plea for rational and scientific discussion

GOWHER RIZVI

IN the last few weeks a controversy has been raging about the impact of the proposed construction of the hydroelectric project in Tipaimukh on the environment, economy and security of Bangladesh. We cannot afford to take this lightly and we must do whatever it takes to ensure that our national interests are not compromised in any way. We have to make sure not only there is no diminution in the flow of waters in Surma and Kushiya rivers but also there is no adverse environmental or ecological impact, no aggravation of the floods during the monsoon, and most important of all there is no diversion of water from Barak river. These are non-negotiable and lie at the core of our national security concerns.

As often happens, the knowledgeable experts have been pushed aside by those who are not so well-informed but have strong opinions and views. The discourse has deteriorated into demagoguery, stridency, devoid of substance and playing to the gallery. Not surprisingly, the debate has generated much controversy and heat but very little light or illumination. Partisan politics and propaganda has replaced the pursuit of truth amongst many commentators.

Like everyone else in Bangladesh I am also deeply concerned and had spoken to many experts, environmental scientists, policy makers and politicians from all shades of opinion to understand the impact of the Tipaimukh project prior to traveling to Delhi. They helped us to understand the issues and raised concerns on which we were asked to seek clarifications and assurances. During our visit we met with the key decision makers in India, including the prime minister, and raised those concerns. Let me summarise the facts and information that we have been able to gather:

- Tipaimukh, located in the Indian state of Manipur, is a multipurpose project being conceived with twofold purpose: first, it is a hydropower generation scheme that will produce 1,500 megawatts electricity; and second, it is expected to contribute to the moderation of floods downstream;
- According to scientists and hydrolo-

gists in a run-of-the-river project like this water stored in the dam or the reservoir has to be discharged continuously to enable generation of electricity. During high flood season, the discharge can be regulated to mitigate flooding of the plains while continuing to generate power; During high flood season, the discharge can be regulated to mitigate flooding of the plains while continuing to generate power;

- The flow of water in the two tributaries of the River Barak in Bangladesh, Surma and Kushiya, is unlikely to be affected as there will be no withdrawal or diversion of water in the project. A dam with a reservoir practically augments the flow of the river in the lean period and does the opposite in the rainy season;
- It can have adverse impact on downstream users only if water is diverted elsewhere for irrigation or other uses. In the agreement signed by Manipur government and the National Power Corporation there is no provision for the construction of a barrage or any diversion of water from Barak River. Within India itself river water sharing is an acute problem and a source of conflict between different states. We believe that the Indian government understand and value their inter-state relations. Assam and Nagaland, like Bangladesh, are also lower riparians and Barak passes through these states before entering Bangladesh. Governments of these two states have not objected to the project and have actually welcomed it because they also will benefit from its flood mitigation, dry season augmentation and power generation components;
- The signing of a Promoter's Agreement between the Government of Manipur, NHPC Ltd. and Sutlej Jal Vidyut Nigam Ltd. On October 22, 2011 is an intent to set up a joint venture company. It is expected that the project will be completed in 87 months after the govern-

ment approval has been received. The project will be funded through World Bank financing and so far, to the best of our knowledge, the funding has not been arranged or even discussed with the Bank;

- Bangladesh is ecologically vulnerable and a victim of global warming. The importance of biodiversity in a world where pressure is fast pushing out vulnerable communities and animals from their natural habitat cannot be overstated. The Indian environmental groups are deeply engaged in conducting research and informing policy. Our environmental groups should make common cause to ensure that environmental consequences of the project is fully understood and safeguarded;
- We were very mindful of the environmental consequences of the project on

much less. It will also be imperative on India to ensure that the structure is so designed that it can withstand seismic shocks;

- Barak is an international river; and as the lower riparian the interests of Bangladesh has to be taken into account according to current international practices.
- Under the instructions of the prime minister, Dr. Mashiur Rahman and I, together with our High Commissioner in Delhi, met with a number of Indian leaders including the prime minister and ministers for home, finance, power, rural development, and water resources; and the national security advisor. Our discussions were frank, candid and cordial and we were able to satisfy ourselves that our interests and security would not be jeopardised. In particular, the prime minister of India gave the following reassurances:
 - He reiterated his previous assurances in Sharmel Sheik (2009), in Delhi (2010) and in Dhaka (2011) that India would not take any action in Tipaimukh that would hurt the interests of Bangladesh. The same message was repeated in response to the letter from the Leader of Opposition, Ms. Khaleda Zia. (In international diplomacy an assurance from the prime minister of a country is tantamount to a firm commitment of the nation and should not be underestimated);
 - The PM offered to share with Bangladesh all the information relating to the Tipaimukh project including environmental impact, project design and so forth; and he would also welcome any other delegation or study team that Bangladesh may send in the future. Bangladesh civil society and scientists should take advantage of this offer to conduct an in-depth study so that we can reach our own independent conclusions;
 - Tipaimukh project, as conceived, had

provisions for flood control and to increase supply of water during the lean season;

- We were categorically assured that there would be no diversion of water from the river. India will not construct a barrage on the river to divert water for irrigation or any other such use;
- The Indian PM also reiterated his earlier invitation to Bangladesh to become an equity partner in the Tipaimukh project and take a share of the power that will be generated. This would guarantee us a place at the decision-making table and the ability to oversight the project at all stages.

On the basis of the information gathered and assurances received from the highest authorities in India we should be able to delink the Tipaimukh project from emotive and political plain to scientific and rational level. We should accept the reassurances in good faith but also conduct our own scientific studies or to take up India's invitation to go for an in-depth survey to determine the "adverse impacts" on the flow of water of Surma and Kushiya; we should check out the extent to which the project will modulate flooding and enhance the flow of water in the lean seasons; we should assess the probabilities of damage from earthquake or dam bursting; we should conduct a cost benefit analysis of equity partnership in the hydroelectric project; and above all engage India in a dialogue that will enable us to advance our best strategic and economic interest.

To ground the debate in reality it would also behoove us to understand the location and distance of Tipaimukh (Churachandpur District in Manipur) and not confuse it with any other place in Kachar district of Assam. To do this we have to depoliticise the issue, get away from partisan rhetoric and emotional hyperbole, and put our national interest above factional and parochial interests. With the assurances that we have received from the government of India and the access to the information that we have got, we should get on with scientific and scholarly studies. We owe this to our country.

The writer is Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Prime Minister.

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Bangladesh. We learnt that the project is located nearly 140 miles away from Bangladesh borders and it would appear that much of the environmental impact -- flooding, submerging of land, displacement of people, disruption of livelihood and destruction of wild animal habits, etc. -- will be largely confined to India and is unlikely to hurt Bangladesh because of the distance;

- The construction of a large dam in an area that is earthquake prone invariably poses a certain amount of risk for Sylhet area. However, it is unlikely that the Indian government will endanger the lives and livelihood of their own citizens in Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam without proper study and assessment. Looking at the map it also becomes clear (for the distance of the proposed project area from Bangladesh border) that our risks are

Land management system and Digital Bangladesh

M. SHOEBO CHOWDHURY

CORRUPTION has been recognised as Bangladesh's major problem for a long time. This can be justified if one looks at Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI). The land management system is known to be highly corrupted. A World Bank survey reveals that most crimes and corruption in Bangladesh take place in land-related services. There are almost 3.5 million land-related cases pending. A majority of them concern the landless or rural people, who are deprived of the right to justice because of their financial incapability. This is one of the reasons why the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate poverty and hunger, inter alia, by 2015 seem far from attainable.

Due to age-old land management system, corruption has managed to achieve institutional acceptance. The obsolete regulations rely mostly on land officers, revenue collectors and surveyors. Some of them produce doctored records, thus forcing the land owners to bribe them to keep proper records of their land. Other than this, a few sub-registrars, revenue officers and surveyors secretly tempt squatters to take over the land of innocent owners.

In this age of globalisation, we need to get rid of this ominous cycle. The land administration system should be made stronger and trans-

parent. The maintenance infrastructure can be effectively improved by concentrating on the land management, land administration, cadastral and fixed asset surveillance sectors. The quality of land management is



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regarded as a benchmark in civilised societies. The infrastructure functions on a correlation of government and private funded projects. Proper processing of land ownership, regis-

tration, relocation, mapping, tax payment, will or testament and other legal documents will be possible only with modification of the central infrastructure.

The goal of "Digital Bangladesh" can be achieved through digitisation of land records. The Public Private Partnership (PPP) proposed a scheme in which ten IT firms would solve this complicated problem with zero investment by the government. Though the proposition was approved, the project failed to see light due to some intervention. Now, it seems impossible to finish the project in two years as promised by the ministry. This can be attributed to the negligence of the inexperienced management. The Access to Information project could not fulfill its roles. The time limit declared and confirmed by the government on several occasions turned out to be a failure.

With the rising opportunities for IT, failure to accomplish Digital Bangladesh will be a mistake comparable to the negligence we showed while installing optical fiber. India and European countries can be our role models in achieving this. The economy of Bangladesh will flourish and social security can be confirmed. Corruption and human rights violation can be prevented. And most of all, the Millennium Development Plan by 2015 can be attained.

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Women now earn more!



CALLING ALL MEN. Panic now. The Big Switcheroo is here, the moment we've been dreading. Yes, planet Earth is now officially A Woman's World. It will never be a man's world again.

The first inkling I had that something really scary was afoot was when a reader sent me a survey on pay imbalances in the UK earlier this month. It said the average woman in her 20s earns MORE than the average man of the same age.

Then I saw an education article which said university classrooms around the world had become female-dominated. The professions were following, and so will control of society's finances. Yes, the women will have the money.

Last week, I stepped into a lecture hall to give a talk and found that the previous incumbent was a middle-aged woman talking to a roomful of young people, all female but one. "Nursing?" I guessed. She replied, with a smile: "No. Engineering."

Guys, this is an emergency. Media, education and the law are all already dominated by females, so they will be well-placed to reshape society to suit their own ends.

I sat down with some readers of both sexes and we made a list of Ten Ways the World Will Change With Women in Charge.

1) Any art director who allows the publication of an image of an adult woman weighing less than 55 kilos will get the death penalty.

2) All adult males will be sent to camps to learn how to apologise.

3) Laws will be revised so that "it was that time of the month" would be considered adequate justification in defense of even the worst crimes, such as murder, armed robbery and the sending of e-cards.

4) Women who have lots of affairs will be slapped on the back, admired and winked at.

5) Men will be judged solely on how fast their looks are deteriorating, a subject which will be discussed endlessly on chat shows.

"Well, I think the worst result of the financial crisis is that Hu Jintao is getting a bit paunchy."

"Yeah, they always let themselves go."

6) Women would come home from work and slump on the sofa watching TV dramas, while their men flutter around, bringing them drinks and snacks. (This already happens at my house.)

7) When a guy says, "We need to talk," the woman will pretend she didn't hear and then arrange a two-week business trip for herself.

8) Males would be brainwashed at school to spend their lives saying: "You women are so lucky, the older you get, the more attractive you get."

9) Women would lose the ability to use the phone while men would be programmed to sit at home thinking, how come she never calls?

10) On reaching the age of 42, men will get fat and depressed while women will have affairs with 22-year-olds.

Guys, I know it sounds tough, but you can get through it. I live in an apartment with a wife, two daughters, Granny, and a helper.

I've been living in a woman's world for years, and there are benefits. For example, someone delivered a 5,000 calorie cheesecake to our place once.

Guess who got to eat it?

For more men-women combats, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com