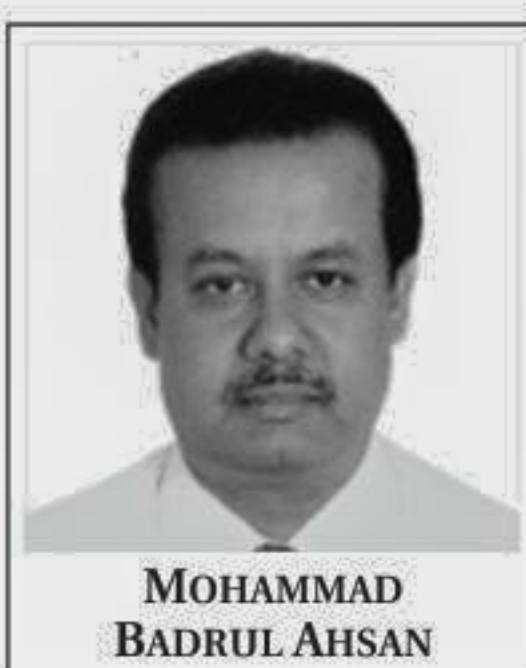


CROSS TALK

A corollary to Hillary visit



MOHAMMAD
BADRUL AHSAN

IF we were to assess Hillary Rodham Clinton's overnight visit to Bangladesh last week, the best part

of it was that she took the words right out of our mouth. She said that the political parties should sit together. She talked about good governance and the importance of an engaging parliament. She was supportive of the caretaker concept, and the performance of plurality to strengthen democracy. The world's number one diplomat spoke of nothing that we didn't think already.

The difference is that when Hillary spoke, she spoke with authority. She met with people who mattered, one by one at a dizzying speed, covering in hardly 24 hours what the people of this country failed to achieve in over 41 good years. She said within a few hours what we have been trying to tell our leaders since 1971.

Whether it will change anything remains to be seen. While the country's airspace still smelled of the burning fuel of the jet that carried Hillary to India, the opposition leader roared with yet another three-day ultimatum for the government, either to return Ilyas Ali or face tougher political movements. We don't want our politicians to be subservient to the insidious wiles of foreign influence. But such a fast resumption is perhaps a worrisome indication that Hillary Clinton may have wasted her breath on our behalf.

Peruvian Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa professes that eroticism has its own moral justification, because it says that "pleasure is enough for me." He claims it to be a



SHANNON STAPLETON / AFP

The upshot of the Hillary visit is that it showed she and the people of this country are on the same page. She spoke on our behalf and she hit the bull's eye. We need a national dialogue and a national consensus. We want an end to political convulsions that are going from bad to worse.

statement of the individual's sovereignty. Curiously, it's Llosa's definition that sticks every time we talk about sovereignty in this country.

It's up to each and every one of us to decide how much pleasure is enough. Is it enough to win an election or to usurp it? How many times is enough for anybody to win elections? How much money is enough for anybody? Is it enough to defeat an adversary or to finish him? How many times does one political party have to return to the power of this country?

It's an open secret that this country is divided into distinct territories of sovereign individual or group interests, and each of those interests miserably falls short of the sovereign national interest. Hillary tried to con-

nect them all, her intention being nothing less than honest. She tried to use her influence to unite a divided nation. In that respect, she proved to be one of us, more so than our own leaders, who, blinded by parochial interests, have lost sight of their own people.

Many of our politicians and civil society leaders are unhappy because a foreign leader has pontificated on the virtues of democracy. If you carefully think, what Hillary did was a difficult task. She must have carefully crafted her words, and polished them over many times so that she didn't hurt any feelings in the host country. The second best thing about her visit was how she told our leaders that they needed to grow up.

And this Hillary said in so many words. Those who look for other motives behind her visit may gladly do so. But she made it amply clear that the purpose of her visit was none other than asking our leaders to get their acts together. She hardly mentioned terrorism. She scarcely commented on US investment in Bangladesh. She said almost nothing about trade and commerce. While our experts and analysts got hoarse voice from screaming they knew why she was here, Hillary put her focus where it belonged. She talked about democracy and the people.

So the upshot of the Hillary visit is that it showed she and the people of this country are on the same page. She spoke on our behalf and she hit the bull's eye. We need a national dialogue and a national consensus. We want an end to political convulsions that are going from bad to worse. We want this country to come out of what is alarmingly beginning to look like a silent civil war raging in our hearts.

The history of the Oracle of Delphi has it that while in a trance priestess Pythia spoke in ecstasy that were translated by the priests of the temple into elegant hexameters. It is up to us how we translate Hillary Clinton's words. But she said nothing that our leaders shouldn't have known beforehand.

Not a pretty sight, when the incumbent prime minister and the former prime minister of this country have to sit before foreign visitors like students eager to learn. That itself is an embarrassment, not to speak of the ignominy of having to listen to them lecturing on rights and wrongs. People make a republic. Last week, it appeared that Hillary Clinton knew and understood it much better than our leaders did.

The writer is Editor, First News and an opinion writer for The Daily Star.
Email: badrul151@yahoo.com

WB report on Padma Bridge corruption

The government must come clean on it

WE are not quite certain what the Ministry of Finance would have us believe about the World Bank (WB) report on the Padma Bridge Project, which has brought allegations of corruption against the communications ministry in the selection of consulting firm. Reportedly, the WB is all but ready to cancel its funding of the Project as no palpable action has been initiated by the government as yet on its reports, the second of which has been handed over to the government in April. And it is only recently that we have come to know about the second report but wonder why the substance has been kept out of public knowledge so far. And yet the government continues to stick to its guns.

It was astonishing to see the finance and communication ministries come up with rather untenable arguments after the first report on the alleged corruption was delivered to the government, trying to dismiss it out of hand on the grounds that when the work had not even started there could hardly be any scope to indulge in corruption. That has not helped to clarify the matter to the public but has only reinforced the perception of opacity on the part of the relevant ministries.

Regrettably, the more the government drags its foot on the matter the more it risks losing credibility with other international financing organisations who have already indicated that they would only come on board after the government has sorted the matter out with the WB first. And that includes Japan too.

We do not think the position of the government in this regard is justifiable. The answer to the allegation of corruption, the specifics of which have been provided in the second report, is not to go only for alternative source of funding, which the government can very well do and, if it so wishes, keep the WB out of it. But the fundamental question, that of corruption, will not be answered if the government does not go to bottom of the matter and address all the points raised by the Bank through an impartial enquiry.

Expatriate workers' plights in Maldives

Fake manpower agencies to blame

OUR migrant workers face numerous ordeals having landed in the destination countries, especially those in the Middle Eastern region, due to illegal manpower agencies. One would naturally have expected a better situation for them in the South Asian region what with strong diplomatic ties between the SAARC countries. But contrary to our expectation, an uncertain fate awaits them even in a country such as the Maldives. A news item carried in a leading Bangla daily tells us nearly 50 thousand Bangladeshi workers are staying miserably as illegal immigrants in the Maldives as a result of collusive practices between unauthorized manpower agencies of the two countries.

Fraudulent manpower agencies operating in the Maldives join hands with those of the unauthorized Bangladeshi agencies and procure fake work permits and promise jobs to the workers based on spurious documents. The workers, having spent more than two lakh taka each, finally fly to the Maldives only to find out that the company which is supposed to have recruited them does not exist at all. With no legal work permit whatsoever, they become illegal immigrants and face immense discrimination at the hands of their temporary employers and constant fear of detention by the police.

Bangladeshi mission in the Maldives has revealed that it attested the work permits of only 58 workers in 2010 whereas thousands of workers went there in that year alone. It proves the unthinkable extent to which illegal workers migrate there every year.

We think that the expatriate welfare ministry has a part to play in this context. It is for the ministry to ensure that not a single expatriate worker is defrauded. The ministry officials should take all the necessary steps to legalize the workers' status. Furthermore, they must make sure that none can leave the country without authentic attestation of their work permits. If necessary, they should put in place

The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

How India became America

AKASH KAPUR

ANOTHER brick has come down in the great wall separating India from the rest of the world. Recently, both Starbucks and Amazon announced that they would be entering the Indian market. Amazon has already started a comparison shopping site; Starbucks plans to open its first outlet this summer.

As one Indian newspaper put it, this could be "the final stamp of globalisation."

For me, though, the arrival of these two companies, so emblematic of American consumerism, and so emblematic, too, of the West Coast techie culture that has infiltrated India's own booming technology sector, is a sign of something more distinctive. It signals the latest episode in India's remarkable process of Americanisation.

I grew up in rural India, the son of an Indian father and American mother. I spent many summers (and the occasional biting, shocking winter) in rural Minnesota. I always considered both countries home. In truth, though, the India and America of my youth were very far apart: cold war adversaries, America's capitalist exuberance a sharp contrast to India's austere socialism. For much of my life, my two homes were literally -- but also culturally, socially and experientially -- on opposite sides of the planet.

All that began changing in the early 1990s, when India liberalised its economy. Since then, I've watched India's transformation with exhilaration, but occasionally, and increasingly, with some anxiety.

I left for boarding school in America in 1991. By the time I graduated from high school, two years later, Indian cities had filled with shopping malls and glass-paneled office buildings. In the countryside,

thatch huts had given way to concrete homes, and cashew and mango plantations were being replaced by gated communities. In both city and country, a newly liberated population was indulging in a frenzy (some called it an orgy) of consumerism and self-expression.

More than half a century ago, R. K. Narayan, that great chronicler of India in simpler times, wrote about his travels in America. "America and India are profoundly different in attitude and philosophy," he wrote. "Indian philosophy stresses austerity and unencumbered, uncomplicated day-to-day living. America's emphasis, on the other hand, is on material acquisition and the limitless pursuit of prosperity." By the time I decided

to return to India for good, in 2003, Narayan's observations felt outdated. A great reconciliation had taken place; my two homes were no longer so far apart.

This reconciliation -- this Americanisation of India -- had both tangible and intangible manifestations. The tangible signs included an increase in the availability of American brands; a noticeable surge in the population of American businessmen (and their booming voices) in the corridors of five-star hotels; and, also, a striking use of American idiom and American accents. In outsourcing companies across the country, Indians were being taught to speak more slowly and stretch their O's. I found myself turning my head (and wincing a little) when I heard young Indians call their colleagues "dude."

But the intangible evidence of Americanisation was even more remarkable. Something had changed

in the very spirit of the country. The India in which I grew up was, in many respects, an isolated and dour place of limited opportunity. The country was straitjacketed by its moralistic rejection of capitalism, by a lethargic and often depressive fatalism.

Now it is infused with an energy, a can-do ambition and an entrepreneurial spirit that I can only describe as distinctly American. In surveys of global opinion, Indians consistently rank as among the most optimistic people in the world. Bookstores are stacked with titles like "India Arriving," "India Booms" and "The Indian Renaissance." The Pew Global Attitudes Project, which measures opinions across major countries, regularly finds that Indians admire

values and attributes typically thought of as American: free-market capitalism, globalisation, even multinational companies. Substantial majorities associate Americans with values like hard work and inventiveness, and even during the Iraq war, India's views of America remained decidedly positive.

I have learned, though, that the nation's new American-style prosperity is a more complex, and certainly more ambivalent, phenomenon than it first appears. The villages around my home have undeniably grown more prosperous, but they are also more troubled. Abandoned fields and fallow plantations are indications of a looming agricultural and environmental crisis. Ancient social structures are collapsing under the weight of new money. Bonds of caste and religion and family have frayed; the panchayats, village assemblies made up of elders, have

lost their traditional authority. Often, lawlessness and violence step into the vacuum left behind.

I recently spoke with a woman in her mid-50s who lives in a nearby village. She leads a simple life (impoverished even, by American standards), but she is immeasurably better off than she was a couple of decades ago. She grew up in a thatch hut. Now she lives in a house with a concrete roof, running water and electricity. Her son owns a cellphone and drives a motorcycle. Her niece is going to college.

But not long before we talked, there had been a murder in the area, the latest in a series of violent attacks and killings. Shops that hadn't existed a decade ago were boarded up in anticipation of further violence; the police patrolled newly tarred roads. The woman was scared to leave her home.

"This is what all the money has brought to us," she said to me. "We were poor, but at least we didn't need to worry about our lives. I think it was better that way."

Here is a lament -- against rapid development, against the brutality of modernity -- that I have heard with increasing frequency. India's Americanisation has in so many ways been a wonderful thing. It has lifted millions from poverty, and, by seeding ideas of meritocracy and individual attainment into the national imagination, it has begun the process of dismantling an old and often repressive order. More and more, though, I find myself lying awake at night, worrying about what will take the place of that order. The American promise of renewal and reinvention is deeply seductive -- but, as I have learned since coming back home, it is also profoundly menacing.

The writer is the author of the forthcoming *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India*. © New York Times. Distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

May 11

330 Byzantium is renamed Nova Roma during a dedication ceremony, but it is more popularly referred to as Constantinople.

912 Alexander becomes Emperor of the Byzantine Empire.

1812 Prime Minister Spencer Perceval is assassinated by John Bellingham in the lobby of the House of Commons, London.

1857 Indian Revolution: Indian rebels seize Delhi from the British.

1949 Israel joins the United Nations.

1960 In Buenos Aires, Argentina, four Israeli Mossad agents capture fugitive Nazi Adolf Eichmann who was living under the alias of Ricardo Klement.

2000 Second Chechen War: Chechen separatists ambush Russian paramilitary forces in the Republic of Ingushetia.