

BOTTOM LINE

40th Bangladesh-Nepal relations: Close bond of friendship



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

THIS year marks the 40th Anniversary of diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and Nepal, and the relations have been excellent. There have been exchanges of visits at the highest political level between the two countries in strengthening bilateral relations.

Nepal has gone through a rapid and unprecedented transformation in its political history. For the first time, the Himalayan nation turned into a Republic from the monarchy since 1768. For the first time, a re-ordering of society seems to be in the offing, dismantling hierarchical society in which feudal lords and caste discrimination have been dominant.

Nepal is separated from Bangladesh by only 22 kilometres of Indian territory between them. The interactions between the people of Bangladesh and Nepal go back to thousands of years.

Nepal's attitude during Bangladesh's War of Liberation in 1971 was cautious. Although it did not wish to publicly offend Pakistan, the Nepalese government supported the cause of freedom of Bengalis in discreet ways. When a Bengali diplomat left the Pakistan Mission in Kathmandu in 1971, the government allowed the person to stay in Nepal and work unofficially for Bangladesh. The people of Nepal, including Nepali Congress leader B.P. Koirala expressed support and sympathy for the people of Bangladesh during the difficult period.

The late King Birendra visited Bangladesh in 1978. Bangladesh and Nepal set up a Joint Economic Commission and signed an Agreement on cultural, educational and scientific exchange between the two countries in 1978 following the King's visit.

Nepal is a land-locked country situated between two of Asia's giants -- India and China. It is a \$20 billion economy with 29 million people. Trade and joint collaboration in economic fields are growing. During 2010-11, two way trade was around Tk.500 crore (Bangladesh's exports were worth Tk.350 crore and Nepal's were Tk.150 crore)

On May 28, 2009, a four-member delegation from Nepal visited Bangladesh and had talks on increasing trade and other relations. The meeting considered the movement of goods between the two countries in trucks

transiting through India's territory. It also discussed the use of Mongla port in Bangladesh for transporting goods to and from Nepal at a concession rate. To promote tourism, travel agents and tour operators of both countries would jointly coordinate necessary steps.

Bangladesh transport experts note that following the visit of Bangladesh prime minister to India in January 2010, India agreed to provide transit facilities to Nepal by road and rail. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Railway is working to find the most convenient route for rail transit to Nepal after India's positive response, according to Bangladesh Railway officials

People-to-people contact has increased. Cultural and technological co-operation have developed between the two countries. A few bilateral co-operation agreements have been concluded. Both countries have proposed bus service between Dhaka and Kathmandu to facilitate trade, tourism and

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contacts among people. The official and institutional ties are endless and grow as time passes.

Nepal has a huge hydropower potential. In fact, the perennial nature of Nepali rivers and the steep gradient of the country's topography provide ideal conditions for the development of some of the world's largest hydroelectric projects. Current estimates are that Nepal has approximately 42,000 MW of economically feasible hydropower potential.

Bangladesh and Nepal may cooperate to harness the hydropower, a part of which may be sold to Bangladesh. Some energy experts say a South Asian energy grid could be established with hydropower from Nepal and Bhutan (about 23,000 MW potential hydropower) in cooperation with India and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is the home of the Royal Bengal tiger and both countries co-operate in the preservation of tigers under the Tiger Project. Bangladesh-Nepal co-operation is

needed to curb the smuggling of cannabis and to monitor terrorism in the region.

Bangladesh seeks Nepal's co-operation in the management of environment and waters resources in the region. What Nepal does with respect to environment and water management has an impact on Bangladesh. There is a saying that if "Nepal sneezes, Bangladesh is sure to get flu."

Nepal and Bangladesh are members of Saarc, BIMSTEC, and NAM and co-operate closely on international and regional issues. The armed forces of Nepal and Bangladesh participate in peace-keeping exercise under the auspices of the UN. Furthermore, both countries are LDCs and are working together to design a new international strategy for the LDCs to come out of the group.

Economic globalisation is a reality in a competitive world and both countries have been adjusting themselves to the new de-regulated economic environment. Trade liberalisation has been both an opportunity and a threat to them because of competition. At the Saarc level, both countries try to take a common approach on issues of mutual interests.

China has been building a rail link between Tibet and Nepal since 2008, and it is reported that a railway line from Tibet's capital Lhasa to the border town of Khasa (80 kilometres of Kathmandu) will be built. During the visit of the Chinese prime minister in January of this year, Nepal requested China to extend the railway line to Kathmandu and also up to Lumbini.

The Chinese premier reportedly said such an extension was highly possible. If the rail-road reaches Kathmandu from Lhasa, Bangladesh may find another route to send its products to China.

Both countries have common approaches to many political issues. Both nations want a peaceful South Asia for economic growth and wish for diplomatic settlement of disputes between India and Pakistan.

The relation between Bangladesh and Nepal is based on mutual trust and respect. They are bound to grow as both countries have similar goals, which could be achieved by cooperative efforts. There appears to be a solid basis on which to build on a wide range of relationship for benefit to both countries. Both countries need to reflect on the direction which their great potentials will take in the 21st century.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

'Underutilisation of funds is a big challenge'

Rasheda K. Chowdhury, Executive Director, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), and a former adviser to a caretaker government, gives her thoughts on the budget allocation for education.

OVERALL there is nothing new worth giving attention to. But there are some good things which we welcome, such as the implementation of the education policy. Education policy had been adopted a long time back but we did not see any reflection of it or any mention about it in the budget last year. This year, it has been mentioned with great importance that it will be implemented gradually. But we have not seen any budget outlay for initiation of the implementation work.



Rasheda K. Chowdhury

Another aspect is that in this budget the scope of social safety net and affirmative action plans for girls under this safety net programme, like scholarship, waiver in admission fee, etc., have been increased. We also wanted allocation for education research but it did not get proper attention in the budget.

We had a demand that primary and mass education should be decentralised and it was also in the manifesto of the current government, but we do not find any guideline or budget allocation for this purpose. The education of the people in Chittagong Hill Tracts has been assigned to the CHT District Committee but education in the mainland is still very much centralised.

Till 2008 there were 1,900 villages without schools and the government promised to establish 1,500 schools in those villages. So far, only 780 schools have been established, but we have found no allocation for the remaining number to be set up. It leads us to doubt whether their promise of building 1,500 schools will be realised.

The budget amount has increased but its ratio to our GDP has decreased. The amount of allocation per student has gone down because more students have been enrolled compared to last year.

The government has formed a committee for the nationalisation of the jobs of primary school teachers but there is no budget allocation for this. Furthermore, for implementation of the Permanent Pay Commission, some fund needs to be apportioned, which is not being done. Some steps have already been taken but there is need for allocation for the completion of the other steps.

We also don't see any directives for implementation of the action plan of extending free and compulsory primary schooling up to class VIII whereas the ministry is preparing an action plan.

It is an achievement that the government has formed a long-term plan for primary education, PEDP, which is an umbrella programme. Now, we are at the third stage of the PEDP, which is not project based. I think projects cannot yield good results. Our education budget for primary education has been formulated in accordance with the PEDP-3. However, there are some weaknesses in the implementation process, like mismanagement and non-utilisation of the funds within the projected time. Under-utilisation is a big challenge, which the finance minister admits.

I was personally involved with "Creative Talent Hunt Policy, 2012," which is a good way for identifying talents across the countries. We have scholarship and stipend programmes through which it is not always possible to find out the talents. This programme will be implemented at the grass root level. Competition will be held at the district and Upazilla level and the winners will come to the national level and get recognition. This is a positive step.

India's tobacco girls

DAVINDER KUMAR

FIVE-YEAR-OLD Aliya thinks it is some kind of a game she must soon master to be a winner. From the time she wakes up till she goes to bed Aliya watches her mother and all girls and women in her neighbourhood consumed in a frantic race. They all make *beedis* -- the traditional hand-rolled Indian cigarettes.

For each *beedi*, the roller painstakingly places tobacco inside a dried leaf sourced from a local ebony tree; tightly rolls and secures it with a thread; and then closes the tips using a sharp knife. For anything between 10 and 14 hours, regardless of how long it takes, Aliya's mother and others must all roll at least a 1,000 *beedis* to earn a paltry sum of less than \$2 paid by the middleman. The *beedi* manufacturers, however, make billions of dollars.

The cigarettes are taken to warehouses of large manufacturers, packaged and sold in the market for a much higher price. The *beedis* are so popular that they make for nearly half of India's entire tobacco market. But, behind the country's unorganised domestic tobacco sector, lie invisible millions who are trapped in modern day economic slavery.

In Aliya's town of Kadiri in Andhra Pradesh alone, hundreds of families have for generations relied on *beedi* rolling as their only means of survival. The labyrinthine, congested lanes of Kadiri slums are home to an assembly line of humans functioning like robots. Young girls and women alike can be seen rolling cigarettes in groups out in the open. Some sway, some rock back and forth appearing entranced, while others have developed odd muscular motions as they push their work speed to the edge of human limits.

For most, if they do not roll enough *beedis* every-day there simply will not be food on the plate. "The pressure to keep up with the speed and meet the target is so intense that many skip their meals and even avoid drinking water so they do not need to go to the toilet," says Shanu a community volunteer.

Almost all *beedi* workers in Kadiri, like the other *beedi* manufacturing pockets in India, are female and a large number of them young girls. The home-based process is preferred by men over sending women and girls outside for work. Aliya has already started her lessons early and is practising rolling *beedis* using cuttings of plain paper. "I want to roll *beedis* and give money to my mother," she says.

A study released nearly three years ago estimated that a scandalous number of over 1.7 million children are working in India's *beedi* rolling industry. Children are knowingly engaged by manufacturers due to belief that children's nimble fingers are more adept at rolling cigarettes.

Under the Indian law, *beedi* rolling is defined as hazardous work. But there is a loophole wherein children who assist their parents in their work do not come under the purview of the law.

"Formally, it is the women who take on the orders from the contractors. However, behind the scenes given the pressures these women face in terms of delivering on huge volumes, invariably children, mainly girls, get pulled into this to support their families in *beedi* rolling," says Anita Kumar of Plan India.

As part of its global campaign 'Because I am Girl,' the child rights organisation has started a programme focused on girl child labour in Andhra



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Pradesh, including girls involved in *beedi* making. The project will collectively impact 1,500 girls over 3 years.

Children trapped in *beedi* work will need a rescue effort on a much larger scale. "We are aiming to create a model by working with communities and the local government structures ensuring that children are prevented from falling into this cycle of labour," says Kumar.

From unhealthy living conditions to exploitative wages, slave-like working conditions and severe health consequences -- the situation of *beedi* workers involves violation of their fundamental rights and freedoms on many levels. The majority of girls are pulled out of education by the time they complete primary school to support their families' income.

Youngest among four siblings, 11-year-old Salma dropped out of school last year when she completed grade 4. "I wanted to continue going to school but we are very poor and have been struggling to pay the rent," she says as she struggles to draw breath.

Salma is suffering from jaundice and is so frail she can barely sit straight. Yet, she is tasked with rolling up to 1,500 *beedis* a day to support her family. Squatting on the floor and hunched up, she rolls cigarettes for over 12 hours every day and still earns just over \$2.

In addition to jaundice, Salma has also developed a ringworm infection on her wrist, quite common in

the area due to poor hygiene and sanitation. She is in dire need of medical attention but visiting local hospital means a day off work due to long queues and a day's wage in transport. Her parents cannot afford either.

The health impact on *beedi* workers is visible in all age groups. Tuberculosis, asthma, body pain and postural problems related with hips and joints are most common. Continuous *beedi* rolling leads to absorption of high doses of nicotine directly through skin. The skin on the children's fingertips begins to thin progressively, and by the time they reach their 40s they cannot roll cigarettes any more.

Mahboobjaan, a mother of three girls, is in her mid-30s and is already losing sensation in her hands. "My hands often swell up. I don't know what I will do if I can't roll *beedi* anymore," she says.

The worst thing for *beedi* workers is the feeling that there is no protection, no welfare, no state support. They vote but have no power or effective representation. For all development indicators they remain at the bottom of the ladder all their lives. Even among them, girls suffer the most. Throughout their life cycle their basic rights are violated; as children, as child brides, as young mothers, they continue to fight for survival with extreme labour and economic slavery.

In summer as the temperatures reach 45 degrees Celsius, streets in Kadiri are engulfed in a stifling cloud of tobacco dust. Infants play among heaps of tobacco leaves. Covered in a pool of sweat, young girls roll *beedis* with their eyes transfixed on their tobacco tray. Older women, who cannot roll any more, help with trimming the ebony leaves. The work continues till late in the night just to secure next day's meal and to keep a roof above the head.

Next morning, and for most every single morning for rest of their lives, it is exactly the same story. The breathless race to 1,000 starts with 1 all over again.

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