The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SUNDAY AUGUST 12, 2012

## Issue detailed notification for Padma Bridge fund collection

*It should provide instructions to ensure accountability*

FROM what has been reported in the press, it appears that a number of ministries have jumped on the bandwagon of collecting money from salaries of officials. It is precisely for this reason that the government must issue an official notification on the subject in question, for without clear cut mechanisms, over enthusiastic bureaucrats will engage in this sort of unauthorized fund collection, which are obviously being done to ingratiate the prime minister, rather than out of a genuine concern for bridge building. We are at a loss as to how they are planning to take a cut out of employee salaries, especially in light of the fact that the finance minister in an earlier statement had categorically stated that no one has been assigned to collect such funds. The proposals vary widely from ministry to ministry, but such activity is tantamount to extortion at government level.

Thanks to contradictory statements coming out from the top tiers of the government, there is much confusion about who will contribute what. To think that it has been suggested that employees will 'donate' anywhere between one day's salary or a festival bonus, and that too will be made mandatory for all is preposterous. While there is no lack of patriotic feeling in the country, the question here is why people are being forced to cough up donations where it ought to be voluntary. The bigger question here is who will ensure the transparency of such collection.

Hence, prior to government instructions being issued, we are not in support of such overenthusiastic voluntary drives to coerce involuntary donations. The government has instructed banks to open accounts. Here too we believe that the government must issue an overarching set of guidelines on the voluntary financial contributions of the people for the proposed bridge construction. Official notification, when it comes, must have appropriate measures outlined for the proper monitoring, auditing and accounting of what is largely, public money being generated for the mega project in question. Without clear cut checks and balances to oversee the handling of large-scale public funds, the question of misappropriation cannot be ruled out.

## Bolt epitomises the best in the Olympics

*How far behind are we?*

WITH his historic win in the 200-metre final on Thursday night, Usain Bolt, the fastest man in the world, carved his name in history by becoming the first sprinter to defend both the 100 and 200 metre double. It was as much a demonstration of his unparalleled skills as his determination to push new boundaries. Little wonder that the whole stadium rose to its feet, applauding wildly when he crossed the finishing line. Bolt symbolises the true sporting spirit of striving for excellence and then making it happen.

The Olympic Games is the ultimate word in the sporting universe, which captivates public imagination the world over and rightly so. It not only showcases the fascinating sporting skills of the world's best achievers but also stands for the human drive to continually improve performance and thereby reach the apotheosis of perfection.

When we watch the world's best sportspersons perform in the Olympics what also attracts our attention in addition to their excellent individual performances is their national identity and the competition between the countries to upstage each other in the medals tally. The Olympics is the ultimate test for each sporting country to make its mark at the highest international level. Participants such as Bolt and Tiki Gelana have upheld the images of Jamaica and Ethiopia as the best ambassadors of their countries.

It is really shocking for us to see that Bangladesh has yet to produce a world-class sportsperson even after forty years of independence. In the realm of sports, every country has its own area of excellence. Has Bangladesh literally taken the Olympic precept of participation only and even dropping off at the heat stages? It's high time the govt. and the private sector hammer out an action plan to groom up sportsmen and women beyond regional standards and reach out to the Olympic level in

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

**August 12**

**30 BC**
Cleopatra VII Philopator, the last ruler of the Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty, commits suicide, allegedly by means of an asp bite.

**1099**
First Crusade: Battle of Ascalon Crusaders under the command of Godfrey of Bouillon defeat Fatimid forces led by Al-Afdal Shahanshah. This is considered the last engagement of the First Crusade.

**1480**
Battle of Otranto: Ottoman troops behead 800 Christians for refusing to convert to Islam.

**1964**
South Africa is banned from the Olympic Games due to the country's racist policies.

SUNDAY POUCH

# *Jamdani, nakshi kantha* and et al!

ASHFAQUR RAHMAN

FOR sometime now, we have been told that three items which are very dear to every Bangladeshi have been registered by India as its own products. They are the famous *jamdani* sari, the exquisite *nakshi kantha* and last but not the least, the delicious *fazli* mango.

India has opened a register of what is known as Geographical Indicator (GI) of its products. Every member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) which abides by the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement is required to do this. Under Sections 22, 23 and 24 of this Agreement, individual countries have now the right to protect and patent famous, exceptional and extraordinary products originating within the geographical territory of the country, under the GI Act 1999.

India has thus registered (*uppada*) *jamdani sari* as originating from Andhra Pradesh, the nakshi kantha from West Bengal and *fazli* mango from Malda district in West Bengal.

The GI helps producers differentiate their unique products from similar competing products. It enables their producers to build a reputation around such products so that they can fetch a premium price. So far India has listed 158 products in its registry located in Chennai.

Let us first consider *jamdani*, a handloom product. About 300 A.D. Kautilya, in his book Artha shastra, referred to this fine cloth and said it was made in Pundra (now Bangladesh). Arab, Chinese and Italian traders had also given detailed account of this fabric coming from what is now Bangladesh. Around that time a similar fabric was made in Mosul, Iraq, called *Mousoulin*. The Arab geographer Sulaiman mentions that *Mousoulin* fabric was developed simultaneously in Bengal and was called muslin. In his well known book *Sril Silat-ut-Tawarikh* he wrote *jamdani* design was stitched on *muslin* fabric in Rumy, which is the ancient name of Bangladesh.

When the Morrocan traveler Ibn Batuta visited Bangladesh in the 14th century he also saw the *jamdani* made here and praised its quality. An English traveler, Ralph Finch, also spoke highly about *muslin* and *jamdani* made in Sonargaon, near Dhaka. The fabric, however, attained its zenith during the reign of Akbar, the great Mughal Emperor. It had by then become such a sought after item that the British East India Company who came in later had to post a high official in Dhaka to buy *mulmul khas*. He was called the "Daroga-Mulmul." He was commissioned to also supervise the production of *jamdani* in each weaving factory.

The word jamdani is Persian, where "*jam*" means cup and "*dani*" means flower vase. Thus *jamdani* designs depict arrangement of flowers sewn with fine threads on muslin. When the surface of the muslin fabric is sewn with diagonally striped floral sprays, the *jamdani* is popularly known as "*Terchha*." The most exquisite design is "*Panna Hazaar*" (a thousand emeralds), where the floral pattern is highlighted with gold and silver threads. There are other coveted designs such as the "*Kalka*" and "*Phulwar*." The peculiarity of *jamdani* is the geometric design. The weavers do not draw the design before hand on paper. They work on the design from their memory, and express their creative genius.

Through registration of *jamdani* sari as an Indian product, the glorious history and the unique creativity of the Bangladeshi weavers have been ignored and in some ways belittled. Unlike a trademark, which can be owned individually or by a group of people, the GI gives the product a collective right owned by a concerned community. Trademarks are usually transferable or can be assigned to another right holder. But GI rights are perpetual collective rights. In theory, India, by holding the patent to *jamdani* sari is able to increase sales of the item and get higher income. To an outsider, a Dhaka *jamdani* could very well fetch lower price, as the *uppada jamdani* from Andhra has the GI registration. *Uppada jamdani* has only a 300 year old history behind it. At best it is a special type of *jamdani sari*.

> *It is time that our ministries of industries, agriculture and commerce, separately and together, under the aegis of the Prime Minister's Office, start identifying products that originate in Bangladesh and which need to be urgently registered under the GI Act.*

Now let us take the case of the *nakshi kantha*, another exclusive Bangladeshi product. Poet Jasimuddin wrote his famous "*Nakshi Kanthar Math*" in 1929. Through this poem, the art form that had originated in the villages of Bangladesh became known to the world for the first time. The *kantha* is made out of old saris, *lungis* and dhotis. At least 5-7 saris usually make a standard size *kantha* or quilt. They are sewn together to attain the size and the layers required. The needle and thread is used to outline a design followed by focal points. The filling motif is then worked on. The designs are usually flowers, undulating vines, images of birds and fish, animals, etc. No two are the same. Each *nakshi kantha* is unique and often tells a tale. *Nakshi kantha* is quintessentially Bangladeshi.

The third product registered by India under the GI Act is the *fazli* mango. The Indians consider this mango variety as being indigenous to Bihar and West Bengal. It is a late maturing (August) fruit and is large with firm to soft flesh. The flavor is pleasant and the pulp is sweet and fibreless. Its keeping quality is good. But what about Bangladeshi *Fazli* mangos?

In our national anthem, penned by no other than poet Rabindranath Tagore, the beauty of Sonar (Golden) Bangla is described when he writes: "In Falgun (March) your mango gardens spread maddening aroma." Mango is, therefore, in the mind of every Bangladeshi. It occupies a special place in our food, literature and culture. The best variety of mango grown here is the *fazli*, which is grown in the Rajshahi region. But it is grown mainly for domestic consumption. There are virtually no exports. The world, therefore, is unaware that we are a producer of this mouth-watering variety. Due to asymmetric information, India could have taken advantage and registered it as their GI.

It is time that our ministries of industries, agriculture and commerce, separately and together, under the aegis of the Prime Minister's Office, start identifying products that originate in Bangladesh and which need to be urgently registered under the GI Act. But in order to do that, we need to first enact a GI protection law and frame rules under it. We then need to open a registry to inscribe items that are to be protected. So far as we know, a law has been drafted and has been under discussion for the last seven years. The draft outlines how these products need to be protected against any malfeasance by our own traders. It does not outline how we can protect these products from foreign claimants. GI law in Malaysia, Singapore and India incorporates all these provisions.

It is imperative however that we identify now some of the products which we could call as our own. Some of them that could find a place in our registry is the *jamdani* sari of Dhaka, the *naskhi kantha* from Faridpur, Monipuri clothes, khadi of Comilla, hilsa fish from Chandpur, the *fazli* mango of Rajshahi, curd of Bogra, dogs from Sarail in Brahmanbaria as well as honey from our Sunderban forest.

We have to move fast in our effort to prevent some other country from listing our unique products and calling them their own. Any affirmative action by our government in such matters will therefore be welcome. Coleridge had once said: "Silence does not always mark wisdom." We must heed his advice in this case.

The writer is a former Ambassador and a regular commentator on contemporary issues.
E-mail: ashfaque303@gmail.com

The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

# Occupation, not culture, is holding Palestinians back

MUNIB R. MASRI

EARLIER this week, while Israel's cheerleaders and Las Vegas casino moguls were parsing every syllable uttered by Mitt Romney in Jerusalem as fastidiously as the Olympic judges were scrutinising every back flip in London, millions of Palestinians issued a giant collective yawn.

There was little anger when Romney made thinly veiled racist allusions to the supposed inferiority of Palestinian culture and genuflected at the altar of distant fund-raising thrones in New York and Los Angeles.

Of course, Hamas sputtered rejections and the Iranians hyperbolically accused Romney of "kissing the foot" of Israel -- shrill criticisms easily dismissed in the West.

On the legendary "Palestinian street," however, there was only weariness after Romney's slight. It was nothing we haven't heard before, nothing we haven't seen in so many other pre-election panderings.

American Jews like to split hairs over which candidate is more pro-Israel or who better represents their interests: Is Obama's facial expression lacking? Is that omitted adjective by Romney significant? But ask 9 out of 10 Palestinians and you will get an identical response: "There is no difference between Obama and Romney."

President Obama brought his clarion call for hope and change to Cairo early in his tenure. He said nice, positive things about respecting the Muslim world and encouraging a true peace between Israel and Palestine. And then he did nothing in slow motion for more than three years.

Now Romney has waded into the debate. His claim that there can be "no daylight" between Israeli and American policies amused us here in the West Bank. In fact, there is no daylight today under Obama, nor was there under George W. Bush. America's veto of Palestine's bid for statehood in the United Nations Security Council continues to stifle our legitimate ambitions for self-determination. Like peas in a pod or twins in a crib, American foreign policy and Israel's desires move in tandem. Palestine plays no role whatsoever in this cosy equation.

Romney believes that Israel's impressive economic growth is because of the country's strong culture and that the Palestinian economy lags because -- implicitly -- our culture is inferior.

As one of the most successful businessmen and industrialists in Palestine today (there are many of us), I can tell Romney without doubt or hesitation that our economy has two arms and one foot tied behind us not by culture but by occupation.

> *It is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of our Palestinian culture that we have managed to do so well despite such onerous constraints.*

It's hard to succeed, Romney, when roadblocks, checkpoints and draconian restrictions on the movement of goods and people suffocate our business environment. It is a tribute to the indomitable spirit of our Palestinian culture that we have managed to do so well despite such onerous constraints.

It was predictable that Romney would eventually visit our area -- although he didn't actually set foot on our land or see how we live up close and personal -- in order to score points.

Palestinians were genuinely saddened, however, by the fact that he deliberately chose to ignore us. There was nary a word about our plight, our day-to-day challenges, our rights and our future. We were here, just meters away from his entourage, yet we were not on his radar or on his agenda.

To paraphrase an ancient observation: Romney came. He saw only what his advisers permitted him to see. And he conquered his fund-raising goals by saying what his boosters insisted on hearing, while completely ignoring one of the two peoples who live here.

But peace is not made by ignoring one party while lionising the other. In Palestine, we stubbornly continue to hope that the occupant of the White House will one day recognise this.

The writer, a businessman and industrialist, is the chairman of Padico, the Palestine Development and Investment Company.