

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Ershad, a factor or an enigma?



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

ERSHAD'S trip to India is being viewed in New Delhi with considerable political and diplomatic significance, an impression one gathers from media reports in the neighbouring country. Whether it has been any relief for the embattled Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who heads a coalition heavily reliant on regional parties, better be left to imagination. But Ershad's visit couldn't have been timed better for Manmohan as he is a bit relaxed on Anna Hazare and Baba Ramdev. Since the two inadvertently gave a political colour to their corruption agenda with an intent to form political party, they have been drawing lesser crowds. Politics is so toxic!

Ershad, for his part, has got a break, and even a shine to his sheen. As one who tries to keep his nose ahead through difficult circumstances, he must have enjoyed the limelight in India.

He has already met with Indian Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai followed by a talk with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He might have by now met Sonia Gandhi, Congress president and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) chairperson. It is the first official visit of a political leader not heading a government from any neighbouring country to India, perhaps in a few decades.

Recall that Manmohan Singh during his last trip to Dhaka invited opposition leader and BNP chief

Khaleda Zia and Jatiya Party chief H.M. Ershad to visit India. Begum Khaleda Zia couldn't clearly be in a hurry to visit India as that would upset her anti-India vote bank.

Going by Indian media reports quoting Indian external affairs sources, India "has sought assistance from Jatiya Party chairman H.M. Ershad and leaders like him to "calm down" the BNP-Jamaat alliance diplomatically." The word "diplomatically" better be read as "politically."

A certain feeling is conveyed in view of an anti-incumbency trend in Bangladesh, Indian government

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has called upon Ershad to keep the political situation steady till the next general election. Anandabazar Patrika couldn't have been clearer when it quoted relevant sources to say: "Right now, the Indian government does not want any deflection in the relation. That's why the meeting with Ershad is significant for India."

Although New Delhi says it is ready to work with any ruling party in the neighbouring country, its preference shows up.

In passing, one may not fail to discern India's capacity for pragmatism; see how India is being delib-

erately forgetful of President Ershad declaring Islam as state religion of Bangladesh. Indian journalists were expressly puzzled over why as an overwhelmingly Muslim majority country Bangladesh would have the need for a state religion! Then you remember, during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as PM a devastating flood struck Bangladesh, some Indian helicopters carrying aid into Bangladesh were sent back by the then Bangladesh government. This created a diplomatic spat between the two countries in the late '80s.

Largely freed up from the plethora of corruption cases stalking Ershad, he needed to visit India to raise

his political stock with the Awami League or the stature of Jatiya Party with an eye to the next general election. Actually, it served both ways. For India, Ershad is the man to talk to as a major ally of Mahajote government but outside of the mainstream ruling party to get a narrative on Bangladesh's political situation by way of weather taking or testing the waters.

This seems to have been particularly impelled by Ershad's strident criticism of the AL government and his occasional threats of contesting for all 300 seats on his own in the upcoming general election. Even

though Ershad has apparently linked such a step to BNP's non-participation in the polls, some people close to him like to believe that he might try it alone without being dovetailed to Awami League, even when BNP takes part in the election. He has a dream to emerge as an alternative to Awami League and BNP; he boasts he is the potential third force. An octogenarian, mercurial in temperament, often enigmatic and topped up by a controversial track record, one tends to doubt if Ershad is in reckoning.

At any rate, what is Ershad's political stock-in-trade? Going by history of national poll results, Ershad's Jatiya Party got 35 seats in parliament in 1991, 32 in 1996, 14 in 2001 (with JP factionalised) and 27 in 2008 elections, respectively. Its vote share is concentrated and ranges between 6.65 and 7.25% as against Jamaat's 4.28 to 4.55% and others' between 7% and 7.37%. What are Jatiya Party's chances of a potluck in the upcoming elections if it should contest independently? Although he may clinch a larger clout in the next parliament, he couldn't go to power on his own.

Only in the event of a hung parliament emerging out of the next general election, Ershad could be a crucial factor in the formation of a viable government. Even for that to happen Ershad would have to present and lead a united Jatiya Party rid of its fissiparous tendencies.

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Development, the yet untamed horse

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BDHGLADESH is a least developed country (LDC) with consistent economic growth over the years. About a half of the total population lives under the poverty line and its annual per capita income is around \$ 848. Bangladesh has maintained, since the fiscal year 1999 till date, annual average growth rate of more than 5.7%, which falls in the range for an LDC. In order to advance reduction with the aim of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) economic growth, social development and governance are the key areas, and it is also necessary to include human security. Poverty is an extremely important challenge in today's world. Bangladesh is one of the largest LDCs in Asia and still needs to improve several socio-development indicators.

The South Asian region has high potential for development as a prospective market and investment destination following China and the Asean countries, in the context of strengthening economic development and partnership in Asia as a whole. Bangladesh is located between South-East Asia and India and its economic ties should be developed among neighbouring countries as well as international agencies.

Because of the bipolar confrontation between Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, governance problems have become more serious, such as prevailing corruption and deteriorating law and order situation. A notable example is the recurrence of hartal, which inflicts great harm on the economy. In addition, political intervention in administration and planning process is one of the main bottlenecks towards achieving the development goals. We could not achieve any mid-to-long-term development goal since independence.

Social thinkers encourage service to the community, especially to the needy, and this principle is also enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is impossible to identify development as expansion of individual freedom in Bangladesh because the country has relatively less land in proportion to population. Individualist ethic would invite intense competition for ownership of land by fair means or foul as well as activities that would devastate the environment, as is actually happening because of actions motivated by this ethic.

It is difficult to advance with individual resources alone. For poverty allevia-

tion and development that may benefit the disadvantaged, the importance of collective endeavours is indisputable and is independent of any social ideology. So, economic, institutional and political modernisation is desirable to whatever degree it agrees with, or promises to be useful for, obtaining the values held by a given civilisation. We want to increase material welfare and to evolve a socio-political system that will lead to the fuller realisation of a state of being which conforms with our desires.

Diversification of export-oriented industries, increase of private investment, development of social sector, creation of employment and development of agriculture and rural areas are of crucial importance. Major challenges are the eradication of preventable diseases and achievement of quality improvement in education. Measures to tackle natural disasters such as cyclones and floods are also important. Other major challenges are strengthening policy planning and implementation at the central level, promoting institution and capacity building at the centre level, and enhancing community participation at the local level.

In the context of prevailing global realities and in compliance with constitutional obligations and with the aim of fulfilling the commitments made to the people before national elections, the government has set out its development goals and enunciated supportive policies and strategies to bring about the long-cherished socio-economic transformation for building a happy and prosperous Bangladesh. The sixth five year plan did not stress basic needs of the citizen. There are no poverty alleviation projects that can improve the standard of living of the people by raising their income and meeting their basic needs. The plan is based on sectoral basis but not on micro basis. We do not find generation of employment opportunities and improvement in the quality of life of the rural population. Planning institutions should act as independent institutions and should not be guided by any individual/political party.

The ongoing development programmes do not stress on transformation of rural socio-economic structure into a more equitable, just and productive one, nor on empowerment of the rural poor, strengthening of local bodies and decentralisation of power at the local level, closing of the gender gap, giving priority to women's education, training and employment, devel-

opment of indigenous people, etc. It is true that our plans and programmes are centrally formulated and implemented by an administration procedure where local representatives have no participation. Our planned development has been frustrated by political instability and foreign aid flow.

Political intervention in administration and planning as well as implementation process should be looked into to achieve socio-economic development. Improvement in governance is indispensable for effective and efficient promotion of economic growth, poverty reduction and social development. Bangladesh is trapped in the vicious circle of poverty, which is characterised by large-scale unemployment and underemployment, low level income, low productivity due to deficiency of capital, weak technological base, market imperfections and lack of skill. Policy makers should stress on elimination of poverty and inequality. Inclusion of non-viable projects in Annual Development Programme by political pressure groups should not be encouraged.

Keeping in view the changing structure of the global economy, future plans should be prepared within a flexible framework. The planning framework should rest more on flexible projections and forecasts of incremental change in various development parameters than on rigid targets for realisation. In the context of increasing globalisation of economy, the plan may place markets at the centre but it must also attach due importance to the appropriate role of the government and the public sector, as required to fulfil the constitutional obligations of the state for raising the standard of living of all citizens.

The aspiration of our people is to live with dignity. With this end in view, the government should ensure speedy development of our human and natural resources for meeting the basic human needs -- food, clothing, shelter, health, education, etc. The indomitable will of the people as demonstrated in the War of Liberation must be aroused once again to move forward towards self-reliance in agriculture, industry as well as health. The urgent need of the hour is cooperation among the people as well as political parties. The government should take steps to strengthen local government so that it can respond to the needs of the people and bring services to their doorsteps.

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Admission tests are necessary

MIJANUR RAHMAN

THE recent decision of the health ministry not to hold any admission tests for MBBS and BDS courses in medical and dental colleges, both private and public, has sparked widespread protests by the admission seekers across the country. While the authorities have dismissed these protests as manipulations of the coaching centres and argue that the new enrolment process will be fairer as it will allow the top graders to qualify without any hassle for the medical professions, the scrapping of this age-old practice is not without significant ramifications for the quality of the intake, and ultimately the future, of the already struggling health sector in Bangladesh.

What will happen if admission tests are in place for higher education in any discipline? Immediately after the final exam is over, the intending students embark on a rigorous course of study either in a traditional coaching centre or on their own. They have to read between the lines of their previously studied texts. In so doing, even the top graders learn new things, rectify many mistakenly understood points, discover something new, and thus develop their knowledge base and be more ready in terms of their aptitude for undergraduate study.

If we look at the history of higher education in Bangladesh, we will find that all universities initially admitted students on their previous academic results/marks. The idea of admission tests came into being only because there were far more candidates than the seats available. While admission tests are designed to select more qualified candidates, they can also be seen as a means to eliminate the unqualified ones as their previously earned grades can be highly deceptive. It is this established commonsense that forced even the National University to arrange country-wide admission tests for honours teaching colleges decades ago. Likewise, it has provided the basis for a similar practice in all public universities in the country. Even some reputed private universities have gone

for this option. The recent decision, thus, is a journey backwards.

The new decision, surprising and unfortunate for those who have been preparing for the tests the whole year, takes for granted that the CGPA scored by students at the secondary and higher secondary levels truly reflects students' ability and aptitude for higher studies though everything points to the contrary.

Visit a book store in Nilkhet and you will be overwhelmed by the sheer number of SSC and HSC test preparation materials and some books called "suggestions" that form the basis of the students' preparation for the final exams. You will find excellent techniques for top scoring by studying limited materials and by memorising the prepared answers in all subjects. A student receiving a CGPA of 5 on the basis of these can never be automatically considered for admission, at least not in medical colleges.

In SSC and HSC exams, students do not answer the same questions in all boards. If we make a comparative study of the questions papers set by different boards in different years in any subject, we will find that some boards set easier tests than others and thus help inflate the grades of students under that particular board. Taking CGPA as the only indicator will do immense injustice to the students taking public exams under other boards that set comparatively difficult questions for students and thus deflate students' overall CGPA. Admission test is a chance to do justice to them.

SSC and HSC scores can be deceptive. So can the O Level and A Level scores. In order to avoid the deception, many countries have developed standardised tests to accurately measure the aptitude and readiness of the admission seekers for higher studies in all sorts of disciplines. That's why, students seeking quality higher education nowadays have to face tests like SAT, GRE, GMAT, IELTS or TOEFL. Furthermore, many of these tests are discipline specific, showing that mere grades

obtained in pre-university education are not enough to consider a student eligible for further studies.

Admitting students through admission tests is sure to create a number of problems. There are about 8,000 seats in all medical colleges, public and private combined. But the number of top graders exceeded 60,000 this year. There are unsuccessful top graders from the previous year as well. Currently, there is even no published merit list or percentage of marks in students' transcripts, making a proper selection on merit a very difficult task.

Moreover, the argument that coaching centres are taking undue advantage of the admission tests seems to be completely unfounded. While it is true that coaching centres are making money, they are doing it by providing service through numerous meritorious students who can barely afford their academic expenses on their own. Would you ban TOEFL, GRE and SAT tests simply because there are many coaching centres on their preparation? If there is any corruption, as many people allege, the national admission body is to be blamed for that. Coaching centres have nothing to do with it.

Though the other public universities, including BUET, DU, RU and JU, could not even think about scrapping the admission tests, and have already started admission test procedures for this year, the Health Department has gone for a very rash decision that, once implemented, will pave the way for a new generation of untested students in medical colleges with potentially disastrous consequences upon the very crucial health sector.

Admissions tests are absolutely necessary for the above mentioned reasons. Should not we, the conscious section of society, come forward in this regard? Will the government understand what they are doing? Will the High Court effectively intervene to stop the suicidal decision?

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