

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

A 'new high' with China



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

WIDELY circulated British weekly *The Economist* (September 8th-14th 2012 issue), in a story titled "Troubled Waters," observed: "Western governments do not want to see it (Padma Bridge project) snapped up by a state-backed Chinese company ... and that India with

which Bangladesh has had good relations, would do its best to block a high profile Chinese involvement in its neighbour's economy."

The Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Mr. Li Jun in a recent meeting with newspaper editors said: "China holds an active attitude in resuming the loan of the World Bank, and has done a lot of work inside the Work Bank ...". So, the Western apprehensions about China are a little watered down there.

It is worthwhile to note though, Finance Minister A.M.A. Muhith stayed beyond his 10-day trip to Beijing to meet his Chinese counterpart Mr. Xie Xuren to seek Chinese support for the Padma Bridge. Last July, Chinese company Spare Energy Creations Australia Pty Ltd (SECA) had submitted a proposal for building the 6.15 kilometre long Padma Bridge on build-own-transfer (BOT) basis according to the existing design within three years. China proposed to bear 70% of the cost.

One wonders why the West and India would begrudge Chinese cooperation in Bangladesh's infrastructure building? They have not done so in the past; why must they do it now?

As it is, Chinese involvement in Bangladesh's development is fairly substantial. Beijing has invested \$ 250 million in Bangladesh between 1977 and 2010. This figure is topped up by \$ 200 million in a single year 2011.

The accumulated Chinese lending to Bangladesh is

worth around \$ 358 million and grant around \$ 242 million (of which \$ 69 million was used for construction of friendship bridges).

Specific Chinese investment in the pipeline includes \$57.52 million in Uttara Export Processing Zone for manufacturing collectable items including toys and a plant to produce cellphone sets by Chinese Phoenix group.

High cost of Chinese labour at a minimum of \$ 500 per month is impelling many of their companies to relocate their factories to neighbouring countries to stay competitive in the international market. Bangladesh is a favourite destination for Chinese investment in RMG products. "Plenty of cheap labour" at \$ 37 per month which is being touted as an advantage should be taken with a pinch of salt. For, our hard-pressed RMG workers do need fair wages and good working conditions that are far from exploitative. Chinese should know better. At the same time, our infrastructure would

have to be vastly improved for which China itself can come in a bigger way.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a visit to China in September 2011 seeking \$ 2.2 billion for infrastructure project including Second Padma Bridge, Jamuna Railway Bridge, Karnaphuli Tunnel, rail link with

Myanmar and a fertiliser factory.

The rail link with Myanmar has been dropped at the instance of Yangon while the road project linking Kunming in Western China with Bangladesh and Myanmar, is on the table. The tension between Bangladesh and Myanmar centering around persecution of Rohingyas and their statelessness needs to be defused to revive the project of dual connectivity through railways.

Principally at issue is the

Chinese offer of assistance to build the Sonadia deep seaport off the Chittagong coast. Going by *The Economist* article in question, the West and India may be apprehensive of China in return for involvement in Bangladesh asking for "an equity stake and economic

influence as has happened with ports in Sri Lanka and Pakistan." The pointers are towards Gwador in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and implications more geo-political than economic.

By some indications, China wouldn't mind multilateral participation in building up the Sonadia deep seaport for Bangladesh. China's outlook is changing, so what stops Bangladesh from proceeding towards getting a deep seaport in not too distant a future?

Certain immutable factors need to be taken into account while forming any rational and fair judgment on issues of bilateral, sub-regional, regional (both intra and inter) and multilateral engagements: First, both India and China are countries in the neighbourhood intertwined geographically and topographically. Bangladesh has to deal and cooperate with them in order to fulfill its far-reaching developmental goals. Secondly, both are emerging global economic powerhouses with features of developing countries in common with Bangladesh. They have their respective strengths and complementarities which Bangladesh can benefit from. It does not necessarily have to be one-way traffic because wider connectivity brings dividends to all parties in the embrace. Finally, a sovereign country is entitled to different pairs of bilateral relationships without prejudice to one another or sub-regional, inter-regional and multilateral cooperation and connectivity arrangements it may choose to foster.

Most of all, India stands to benefit from a prosperous and stable Bangladesh. And if China does value addition to Bangladesh's economy, this should not in anyway give cause for concern to India. It is indeed in Bangladesh's long-term interest to grow with the two economic giants straddling her frontiers.

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Medical College Intake Cure the cumbersome process

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SINCE we have reverted to the previous system of medical admission, I have a few suggestions to make about admission into private medical colleges so that it is less of a hassle. As there are now far more students seeking admission into private medical colleges than into government ones, the admission process needs much more attention than is currently being given in the private medical colleges.

At present, the system is such that as soon as the students are selected for the government colleges, the students/guardians who can spare the money have to run from one private medical college to another trying to seek admission. The private medical colleges receive applications from any number of eligible candidates and select candidates based on the merit position of the applicants. But no candidate is sure where (s)he will get the chance.

Private medical colleges have different quotas for admission. If there are actually 100 seats, 25 will be for foreign students, 5 for non-solvent but meritorious students, 2 for freedom fighters' children, and five for the college governing body's preferences. So in reality, any college having 100 seats will have only 63 students who will be admitted on merit only. Supposing your merit position is 3500 (after those who got selected in a government college), your chance of getting selected in a private medical college should be guaranteed in one private medical college as there are more than 4,000 seats. But in reality, that does not happen. You have to apply to as many colleges (with a fee of around Tk. 1,500) as you can afford, and still fail to get admitted.

Let me try to explain the situation as best as I can because many applicants to private medical colleges, not to speak of the guardians, do not understand why they cannot get admitted to their desired private medical college despite being eligible.

Let's take the example of 12 private medical colleges in three categories. The most sought after colleges in order of preference being Colleges A, B, C and D. Then there are the middle order Colleges K, L, M and N and the poorest performing Colleges W, X, Y and Z. Suppose your merit position is 250. So you should get a position in either A, B, C or D as each has a capacity of around 100 (actually 63) seats. But taking no chance you have also applied to K. When the results are published you are in the waiting list of B and C but selected in K. College K asks you to get admitted long before B and C or your claim will be cancelled and given to another waiting candidate in College K. Now what is your choice? Do you get admitted in K and forego your chance in B and C?

The same game goes on between A, B, C and D. Supposing you are selected in Colleges C and D but put in the waiting list of A and B. You obviously want to be admitted in College A but C and D give a last date of admission prior to waiting list admission dates of A and B. Now you are in a dilemma. Should you wait and take a chance with A or sacrifice your

wish and get admitted into C? Not taking admission in C might cause you to lose admission in A or B also as those in their waiting list before your merit position may have filled up all the seats of A and B.

I am not mentioning X, Y or Z. They are willing to pounce on any student they get and complete their quota even before those in the waiting lists of the other good ones are eligible to enter. So, by the time you lose your chance in the top and middle order, the lowest performing colleges are already filled up and you are left in the cold.

But things get worse if you are in the merit position of around 2500. Theoretically, you have a right of admission into the K, L, M, N category. But hoping against hope you have applied in one of the A-D category, one in the K-N category and also in one W-Z category. You find that you are now in the waiting list of N and selected in W-Z colleges. Since you have been given a last date of admission in College W, you take no chance, spend Tk. 16 lac and take admission in College W. To your surprise, after a few days you find that the office of N is calling you for admission. College W will not refund your money and you cannot afford another Tk. 15 lacs. Now all you can do is bite your nails and ponder what went wrong. You lose interest and foul up your career.

Having said all this, I have a few suggestions to make. When the students apply for the medical admission test, they have to make a choice of the government colleges in order of their preference. They are automatically (because of computerisation of the system) put in the medical college of their choice given their merit position, district, freedom fighter quota, etc. Is there any reason not to have the same system for those meritorious students who have to opt for a private medical college?

This can also be done after the selection for the government medical colleges. The government should ask the private medical colleges what their fees are and the number of seats that have to be filled in on merit basis, and these should be made public when the applications are sought.

The government medical colleges should first fill up their own seats, make the first auto migration (an automated system which fills up the vacant seats as some students do not enroll even after being selected) and then go for placement of the non-solvent but meritorious category in private medical colleges (this is reserved for 5% of the seats of private colleges). After this, the automated selection of students (seats for the merit quota only) from the list of chosen private colleges can be made.

Let the 63% seats be allotted purely on merit, based on the same principle as the government medical colleges. The Director of Medical Education of the DGHS has categorically stated that computer programming for the private colleges is already done but does not have a formal directive to implement it. It is only the Ministry of Health and Family Planning that can do it. Let the students also claim their right of fair admission into the private medical colleges.

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Struggles of the indigenous peoples

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ON April 12, 2010, our parliament passed a law titled "Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institute Act." The authorities did not take any opinion from any indigenous people for this enactment, the naming of which goes against the wishes of peoples concerned. The Bangla word "*adibashi*" had been used in many documents during the British period. Although the word "*adibashi*" is not used in Bangladesh Constitution specifically there are articles that say all peoples and groups will have equal rights before law (Articles 27, 28.11, 29.2).

The indigenous people here are often referred to as "tribal people" or as "small ethnic groups." But they themselves prefer to be called "indigenous people" or "*adibashis*" (i.e. the original inhabitants of the land). It could be mentioned here that some people have debates over the question "who are the *adibashis* in Bangladesh?" The dominant and mainstream Bengali people also have been living in this territory since more than a thousand years ago.

It is easier to distinguish *adibashis* from the overwhelming Bengali people in Bangladesh than it is to distinguish the indigenous peoples in America, New Zealand and Australia. It could also be mentioned at this point that this way of distinguishing people sets them apart from the mainstream Bengali population at every level.

According to the Bangladesh National Indigenous Peoples' Forum there are 45 indigenous people groups (the official count is 27) in Bangladesh. According to the official census of 1991 there were 12, 05,978 indigenous people out of which 5,01,114 lived in the hilly areas and the rest 7,04,734 in the plain areas of the country. According to that census they would be now around 13, 00,000. There was no separate numbering for these peoples in the last census held in 2001. According to the Bangladesh National Indigenous Peoples' Forum the total number of these peoples is now around 30,00,000.

One aspect of most of the large indigenous communities is that they all have a strong sense of self-identity, and naturally so. They are not ashamed of being what they are ethnically. Since the declaration by UN of 1993 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples this aspect got a boost. This fact added to a sense of belonging together among all the indigenous peoples all over the world, and a clear sense that they matter in every

aspect of God's creation and the life of the entire human race.

These people in Bangladesh would love to maintain their own culture and adhere to their traditional life style within their own settings. Commendably, the younger generations are emerging as big force in the country's growth and national development in almost all fields: they serve in the army and police; there are doctors, nurses, engineers, lawyers, teachers, development workers, human rights activists, arts and culture personalities, political activists and leaders, and so on.

Their socio-economic and cultural system has been badly threatened by the process of migration of the majority community into their territories, and through urbanisation and plantations on their land. Many people have lost their ancestral landed property to the local Bengali people, some of whom take the formers' lands by forgery or force. Over centuries, *jotdars* (petty landlords), landlords and other influential people cheated many indigenous peoples with tacit support from the British raj.

There have been, however, resistance movements from the helpless victims at times for the protection of the land rights, fair labour price, and other social and economic entitlements. The Aborigine Rebellion during 1770-73, Khashi Rebellion in 1783, Santal Rebellion in 1855, Munda Rebellion in 1857, etc. are mentionable. Sadly enough, the resistance yielded no positive result for them.

After Bangladesh came into being in 1971, none of the governments did anything for their lasting good. Many provisions of the Peace Treaty that the government signed with the indigenous peoples in Chittagong Hill Tracts back in 1997 have not yet been implemented.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty between the Government of Bangladesh and the Janasanghati Samiti was signed on December 2, 1997. The Treaty had provided for the restoration of various rights denied to the original inhabitants of that area -- Chakmas, Marmas, Tripura, etc. -- among other things. But have the terms and conditions been implemented? Our prime minister once declared: "First, settling of the land issue there and only then will there be any census." However, let this be with genuine political will and pro-people policy for the upliftment of the down-trodden communities.

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