

# Are we in trouble?

M. MIZANUR RAHMAN

**T**HE food minister claimed that there is such a huge production of food that the government cannot accommodate those in the store houses. This year there is a huge production of rice but to him, it has become a problem as the market price of rice has fallen down due to this ample supply.

The government is in dilemma to balance the interest of the consumer and the producer of rice. To him, when there is massive production, the poor farmers of the country do not get proper price and, on the other hand, when there is less production and less supply in the market, the poor consumers like day labourers, rickshaw-pullers etc. cannot purchase it with the high price due to limited supply.

He demanded that the price of rice in the market has fallen drastically and that is why the poor farmers are very dissatisfied as they cannot run their family with such low returns of production.

Food grain is such a sensitive thing that it demands a strategic and balanced handling of the processes involved.

If there is less production, it is problematic and, again, if there is a huge production, it is also problematic.

Just a year ago, according to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), the price for the coarse rice (*Swarna*, bought by the majority poor) was lowest at Tk.32 and now it is still at the same price.

So, the rice price in the market has not decreased and the poor consumers are purchasing the rice with the same expense. On November 17, 2012, when the minister had stated this fact, the rice price of in the retail market according to TCB was Tk.27-48 having almost no change from that of the month before.

But really the price of rice has decreased; the farmers have sold rice even at the rate of Tk.300 per mound when production cost of that was more than Tk.400. But last year, farmers got better price in comparison to this year. So, the calculation remains: this year, the farmers sold rice with lower price but the consumers are purchasing that rice almost with the same price. Now the question is what is working in between these processes?



Production of one kilo of rice requires 1.5 kg of paddy. Paddy at Tk.550-600 per mound means that Tk.21-22 worth of paddy is required for production of one kilo of rice. As there is a huge production of rice, government can easily distribute the paddy with low price to the farmers -- it will definitely help them from the start.

Then comes the other input costs like those of diesel, electricity, fertiliser and insecticide. In this situation, the government can aim at exporting rice and the capital from this trade can be easily used for subsidies for these inputs.

People do not want a kilo of rice with Tk.10, or like those from the period of Saesta Khan. Rice procurement with proper price and urban rationing can also be good options for the government. Through this, the farmers will not be deprived as that price will at least cover the production cost of rice and the poor consumers; especially in the urban area (who depend mostly on purchased rice) can have subsidised rice. And with that, controlling the middlemen and the syndicate is also a must for the government.

Again, it is also important to realise that rice is not the only food item that we consume. Prices of other food items have also increased. Within the last one year, onion price has increased by 37%, garlic by 52-109%, pulse (*mosur*) 37.8% and the prices of other important food items have increased almost 20% on average.

So, while considering food price, we also need to concentrate on these items as well. Farmers need to be incentivised to produce these items. Finally, having no more storage capacity does not mean that we will not produce much, rather now it is important to increase the storage capacity of rice.

There is nothing to be worried about with the huge production of rice and also there is nothing great in keeping all the rice storage full of rice when the market price of remains higher. Rather, people of the country will love to see the government have a more strategically balanced method for the interest of both the farmers and the consumers. I believe this is possible with the resources at hand.

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## The calculation remains: this year, the farmers sold rice with lower price and the consumers are purchasing that rice with the same amount of money. The question is: What is going on in between this process?

The minister of course deserves the credit for this achievement of rice production, but it also equally goes to the poor people, who after all those obstacles, produced rice other than tobacco or some other cash crops. And as I always highlight, it is very important for us to keep the farmers in the food grain production and the government needs to do everything for it.

The minister is trying to lead his ministry very tactfully and has achieved a significant success but the major problem perhaps is the failure to control the middlemen of this cycle.

The middlemen benefits the most. They, in many ways, capture and manipulate the market. Not only this, the millers purchase the rice at a very low price in

advance when the paddy is in the field. Just one or two months before the harvest season, the farmers suffer from money shortages and the millers and the businessmen grasp this opportunity as well. They provide money to the needy farmers in that rainy day with the condition that the borrower will give them rice once it is husked. And of course, in calculation, the farmers lose the most.

This demand for loan could easily be met by the government banks with some easy conditions. If the government own banks could give some small loans to those needy farmers only for those few months, it could be beneficial for both the government and for the farmers at stake.

# Unholy winds from Jangipur

GARGA CHATTERJEE

**I**T used to be said, what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow. That was a different Bengal and a different idea of "India." If the recent by-election results from Jangipur Lok Sabha constituency of West Bengal is any indication of how Bengal might start thinking tomorrow, that would indicate no small shift in the political landscape of post-partition West Bengal as we have known it. So, what has happened?

After Pranab Mukherjee was made the President of the Indian Union, the Jangipur seat fell vacant. The Indira Congress had declared that Abhijit Mukherjee, the president's son and MLA from Nalhati, would be their candidate for the seat.

In the post-schism scenario between UPA and Trinamool, the latter in an apparent gesture towards the president, decided not to contest the seat. This was astute, as this put the Trinamool in a win-win situation. A triangular contest might have caused a CPI(M) victory, in spite of Trinamul participation. A CPI(M) victory in Trinamul's absence would not have been so damaging.

The Indira Congress candidate won the seat by the slimmest of margins, 2,526 to be exact. His father had won the seat by a margin of 1,28,000. There are no indications that there is a sudden ground-swell of support for the CPI(M).

In fact, its own vote percentage came down by nearly 2% since the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. The Indira Congress vote was down by a staggering 15%.

A rather damaging revelation is that a significant portion of Abhijit Mukherjee's "lead" came from booths were opposition polling agents were allegedly not allowed. So the established parties, both of which can be considered secular, together polled about 95% of the votes during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

This time, their combined total is about 78%. Where did all those votes go?

They went to what are parties which have not had much traction in West Bengal politics and are distinguished by their sectarian appeal to voters; however concealed they may be in the language of generality.

The demographic status of the Jangipur constituency is relevant. It is in the district of Murshidabad, with about two-thirds of the voters being from the Muslim community. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has for long tried to develop a base in such areas with a significant Muslim population by playing on real or perceived insecurities of the Hindu population.

Typically this has involved playing up the issue of illegal immigration from East Bengal, but this time around, that was not really important. Curiously, the BJP partly benefited from a portion of the Muslim vote which swung away from the Indira Congress due to the central

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government's decision of forcibly acquiring vast swathes of land at Ahiron, Murshidabad to set up the much touted second campus of the Aligarh Muslim University.

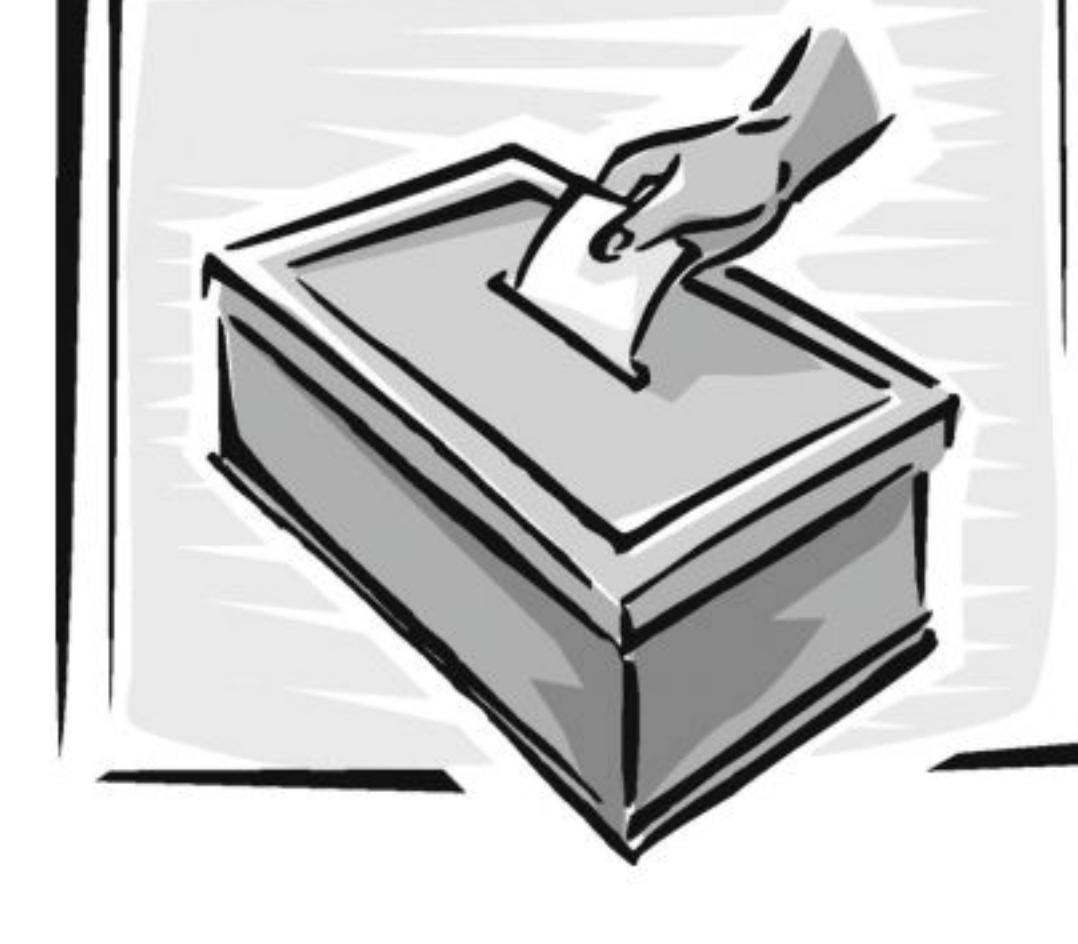
Something else also helped the BJP. This was the entry of two parties into the fray, namely the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI) and the Welfare Party of India (WPI). Much like the BJP, these are outfits that are formally secular, but are implicitly sectarian.

Like the BJP's non-Hindu faces, the Mukhtar Abbas Naqvis and Shahnewaz Hussains, these groups also have show-piece non-Mohammedans. The SDPI is for all practical purposes an extended arm of the Popular Front of India, a sectarian organization whose members have been implicated in creating communally charged scenarios in Kerala. The WPI is a newer outfit, created in 2011 by the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind. Between the SDPI and the WPI, they polled 66,311 votes ( 8 percent ). The BJP received 85,857 votes (about 11%). In 2009, the BJP polled less than 2.5% of the votes.

It is well known that in a communally polarised polity, the poles feed each other. In the process, people's issues that cut across sectarian lines, take a backseat. The question is, whether this result happened due to the peculiar characteristics of this election in this constituency or this has the potential to become a broader phenomenon in West Bengal in the days to come. It is true that the land dispossession of farmers and a non-local Indira Congress candidate helped the opposition.

But the principal opposition party, the CPI(M), could not reap its benefits. The Trinamool too has its own vote, however small, in the area. In the event of its non-contestation, it is clear that all of it did not transfer to the Indira Congress. Part of this vote went to the BJP, SDPI and WPI. Significantly, it is suspected that 'town' Hindus have voted for the BJP in significant numbers.

It is now generally agreed that among the reasons behind the CPI(M)'s demise from power in West Bengal, a collapse in their Muslim vote was a significant one. The



Trinamool Congress wants to ensure a more permanent slice of this vote. This has resulted in a slew of largely cosmetic measures like giving monthly stipends to imams, opening minority employment exchanges, building a gigantic Haj house, vaguely promising reservations, inaugurating trains that go from Bengal to Ajmer and the like.

This rather public posturing, especially things like the imam stipends, have ruffled feathers in sections of the majority community. West Bengal's veneer of secular politics is not something that has a very long past -- both Shyama Prasad's Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League had strong bases in various parts of Western Bengal.

Those strands of political thought have not found legitimate expression for sometime and hence generally have not shown up in voting numbers. But they exist nonetheless. BJP's performance in Jangipur could be replicated in other areas -- it depends on how large is the majority community that has not taken well to the Trinamool's courtship of minorities. In a scenario where the CPI(M) can only oppose the substance of the courtship but not the courtship itself, it is unlikely that the disgruntled will go to them.

The assertion of parties like the SDPI and WPI may help such a communal consolidation of the majority community. And that cannot be good news. Communalism in West Bengal, though not generally overt, can be found easily by scratching the surface. A combination of circumstances can awaken it. Will more such circumstances arise, or will more responsible political parties prevent a potential communal unraveling of West Bengal politics?

Bengal's past experience with communal politics is distinctly bitter, both here in the West and in the East. The west lives with the sleeping demons. In the east, the demons never really slept, and have been in and out of power, thus seriously undermining the plural heritage of Bengal.

## Obama's trip to Myanmar

### a long-term move

EDITORIAL DESK, *The Nation*

**E**VEN though the re-elected US President Barack Obama's visit to Myanmar this week will be brief, it will have a series of significant outcomes for Myanmar and the region. Make no mistake, his visit is part of a long-term strategic plan by US decision-makers, who view the once most condemned nation in the world as a key future ally.

US knows this is the best time to approach Myanmar because Thein Sein government has demonstrated its willingness to engage with the West, especially the US. The latest supposed amnesty for political prisoners is part of US demands in return for a high-profile visit by Obama. After all, Myanmar has been delivering key requests by the US and other Western countries including EU such as widen democratic space, working on national reconciliation, promoting freedom for the media and freedom of assembly, as well as international access to prisoners and other facilities.

The US wants to ensure that Myanmar stays on the reform path so the country is free to make independent decisions. For the past years, Nay Pyi Daw has indicated it wants to distance itself from China, the main provider of aid and other forms of assistance for several decades.

Washington immediately jumped in and has been able to take advantage of the timely situation and turned the situation around in the past two years. With Obama's visit, the future of Myanmar will be tied, more or less, to the global strategic outlook designed by the US. The invitation for Myanmar to be an observer at next year's Cobra Gold military exercise was more than a symbolic gesture. The annual exercise between Thailand and the US has now become a new platform to forge closer military ties for allies and friends of the US.

This wide network of security cooperation comes at a time when China is rising meteorically in both economic and political fields. For the first time, the US has established ties with all countries located in China's southern flank, a weak security area for the US for the six decades since the end of World War II. China is now surrounded by countries friendly or accessible to the US both on the mainland and archipelagic countries in South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia.

In addition, the US also has long seen future threats from the close ties between Myanmar and North Korea. In the past few years, since the "interception" of a North Korean ship thought to have broken UN resolutions, Washington has pressed Nay Pyi Daw hard to sever ties with Pyongyang and end cooperation in nuclear technology. Obama has been spearheading a push for global non-proliferation. Thailand will this week sign on to the Proliferation Security Initiative during his visit this weekend.

Beyond these two important objectives, Obama will also raise violations of human rights related to the plight of Rohingyas. He is expected to call the Thein Sein government to end differences and allow them to be part of Burmese society. He will also encourage the government to try to reconcile with minorities that are still on the fringe and some fighting against government security forces, as in Kachin, Karen and Shan states.

It is clear that Obama is focusing on making his political legacy in this part of the world. It comes at a time when the US faces domestic problems related to the national debt crisis. Therefore, strengthening the US presence along with burden-sharing with countries in the region is the way to go.