

Tangail by-poll results

What lessons for AL and our politics?

THE result of the Tangail-3 by-election shows that AL did not take lessons from the previous by-polls or local government elections, particularly the Narayanganj municipal election. Otherwise, how could it impose a candidate from the top ignoring the preference of its local supporters, and one who lost to the rebel candidate whom the AL chose to disregard, by more than 50,000 votes? More so when it was no secret that the nominee is known to be extremely corrupt. Unfortunately, corruption has permeated deeply into the party. In nominating a corrupt person the AL had in effect endorsed corruption.

Apart from the choice of candidates, it is giving the short shrift to the preference of the AL supporters of the constituency that needs to be pointed out. It seems that the party, which claims to have the largest organisational network in the country, is out of sync with the pulse of its grass roots party members. The election has exposed the serious disconnect between the party top brasses and its local supporters.

We are not surprised by the result of the Tangail by-poll outcome. In the by-elections and local body's elections since the AL's coming to power in 2009 have shown that, but for one, all other candidates of the ruling party, or those endorsed by it, have failed to carry the day in these elections. And the drift has been repeated once again with the win of the rebel candidate of the AL in Ghatail, who sought to go it alone having failed to get the party nomination.

There are many lessons that the AL can draw from the Ghatail debacle, and for that its policymakers must engage in serious introspection, primarily because of what the election has exposed -- alienation that has occurred between the top brasses and the grassroots party members who actually matter in the long run.

This election has bearing on our politics; and the AL and, indeed, all the other political parties who claim to represent the people take lessons from what has transpired in Tangail-3 by-election? While the BNP can take pleasure in the thumping defeat of the official AL candidate it should not forget that a candidate who broke away from BNP and stood on his own in the Comilla by-election won it. And there lies a proof of leadership's hiatus from the grassroots.

The Hazaribagh blaze

A preventable tragedy

THE fire in Hazaribagh that left 11 people dead, more than 15 injured and some 3,000 people directly or indirectly affected, seems to have been a disaster waiting to happen. Though investigation is underway, the fire was possibly caused by cigarette butts, mosquito coils or a kerosene stove, its fierce spread aided by drums of kerosene on the way. The stampede to safety left behind women, children and the elderly, who were the victims.

Irresponsible behaviour of leaving sources of fire hazards alight throughout the night set it off. Congested, unplanned shanty housing, let alone fire escape routes, prevented the getaway of its inhabitants. Lack of knowledge about what to do in a disaster situation as well as the inability to escape resulted in some victims taking shelter in the washroom and kitchen. The alleged delay of the fire brigade in reaching the location allowed the fire more time to spread; two and a half hours of fire fighting when they got there retrieved little in terms of life or property.

The blame can be placed on manifold factors, but preventive actions must be focused. If an analysis of the situation reveals anything, it is that we are thoroughly unprepared to face disaster situations. Our city planning, the citizens' level of awareness, the preparedness of rescue forces all contribute to such predictable, and thus preventable, tragedies.

Though the losses of the residents of the Hazaribagh slum and adjoining tin-shed houses cannot be compensated adequately, we hope that this will come as a stern wake-up call to our city's residents as well as to the authorities in terms of measures to prevent such disasters and to tackle them when they do still unfortunately



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

WHEN we look at our own country the implications of business incubation are immense. All eyes appear to be fixed on

information technology but the next big thing widely acknowledged is biotechnology. Contrary to what people may think, over 200 students from the Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology departments all around the country graduate every year in Bangladesh. Universities such as Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Shahjalal, Maolana Bhashani have varying number of intakes and this has been an upward trend. The question is, where could these genetic engineers go?

Currently, over half of the biotech graduates leave the country for higher studies. They seldom return. About 10% get into related jobs such as teaching, pharmaceuticals and research, etc. Another 10% go to jobs that have no relation to biotechnology. 5% of them start their own businesses and meet with limited success. The future is unknown for the rest 25%. However, if the policy support was in place, they could start biotech enterprises. This is not as farfetched as it appears. Bangladesh has a huge dependency on import for a lot of biotech products that could easily be produced locally.

Take India's experience for instance. The Indian government set up the Department of Science & Technology to help entrepreneurs' kick-start their businesses. The experience has been mixed. The government now has a Technology Development Board that sponsors some 60 incubators with another 30 to 40 incubators that are run privately. Why so much emphasis on incubators? As stated by Roshan Kumar, Manager, Comcubator at Mudra Institute of Communications in Ahmedabad "an incubator can be a great place for entrepreneurs, especially for those who are in the initial stages of their ventures, anywhere

Business incubation: Prospects for Bangladesh

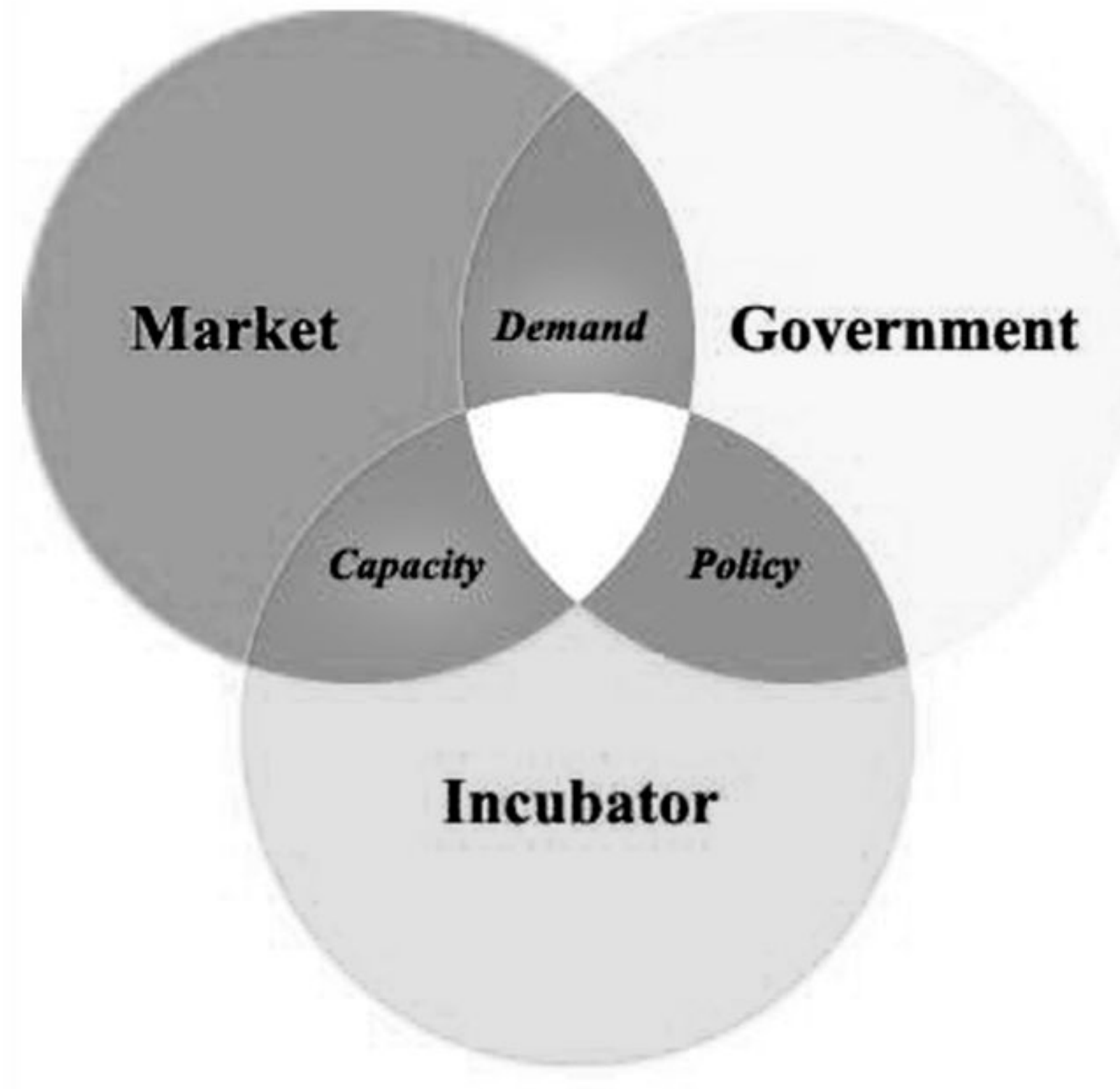


Figure: 3 Success Factors of Incubation.

from conceptualisation to early stages of operations. The incubator acts as a hand-holding guide, mentor and support system and acts as a shield from the outside world so that the entrepreneur can learn to stand up on his own much more swiftly and smoothly. An incubator offers, among other things, a mentorship network, access to investors, quality infrastructure and, above all, a vibrant ecosystem, all or any of which may not be accessible to those outside." However, incubators are only successful where the product or idea is exciting, innovative and implementable.

It is hardly surprising that India has emerged as a centre for technology innovation requisite with skilled managerial and technical manpower that is second to none. This did not come from the heavens. Entrepreneurial skill was backed up by necessary legislation. The Science and Technology Policy, 2001 recognises that science and technology are tools for national development. Formation of the National Science and

Technology Entrepreneurship Development Board (NSTEDB) has had vast implications for incubation. It provides policy guidelines for promoting SMEs. It provides policy guidelines at state-level and basically charts out legislation for foreign direct investment, administrative set up, access to credit, technology development, etc. The NSTEDB goes beyond mere incubation in the strict sense of the word in that it provides policies to aid in marketing, paves the way for a fiscal regime geared towards small-scale industry, helps promote "village industries" that are integrated with existing rural employment generation programmes by providing thrust to small industry, etc. Infrastructure, entrepreneurship development, international cooperation are indeed crucial towards developing an incubation echo-system.

Moving back to the Bangladesh scenario, it is good to learn that the prime minister has urged the National Institute of Biotechnology (NIB) to start a biotech incubator. True, that

NIB has all the modern facilities and equipment in its Gonokbari, Savar campus. Intention is noble, but implementation will be difficult, as most NIB officials themselves live in Dhaka. Yet it is a start. But for NIB to develop, some mechanism needs to be put in place whereby personnel can start learning the ropes from people with experience in running incubators in Bangladesh. Expertise is available in the region which can also be tapped into with ease.

Although this is a recent phenomenon in the country the initial success is not meagre. Take the examples of banglaresora.com or Creativa.Asia. These companies started off with just an idea and a lot of energy to drive forward. However, they did not know how to register as businesses nor had they any clue how to bag businesses once they were registered. However, with the help of one private sector incubator, both businesses are generating income today, creating jobs for people and adding value to Bangladesh's economy. Creativa.Asia is an interior design and event management business which finds most of its clients through the network the incubator maintains. Another incubatee of the same incubator is One Light Studio whose business is rural housing. It works in the villages of Bangladesh, where no architects or engineers step foot. Combining the technical with local knowledge of building houses, they assist to build homes with organic materials that emit zero carbon. They can help a villager build a two-storied house for seven people at the cost of only Tk200,000. Examples like this are only handful because we do not have as many incubators as we should. If a country like Indonesia can have about 500 incubators how many Bangladesh should have? A few young innovators have taken up the challenge but the government should step up and set up incubators in the public-private-partnership modality. It also needs to come up with detail policy guidelines to help facilitate an incubation echo-system.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Obama welcome to see reason

WANG YUSHENG

US President Barack Obama is on a four-day visit from November 17 to Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, where he will also attend the 7th East Asia Summit in Phnom Penh.

Some reports in the international media say the fact that Obama has chosen to visit Southeast Asia on his first foreign tour after being re-elected president shows that he wants to expedite the United States' strategic eastward shift and "upgrade" its China policy. Some observers even believe Obama's visit to Myanmar, the first by a US president in decades, is the "last trick" up the White House's sleeve to contain China.

These views are biased and exaggerate the negative vibes in Sino-US relations. There is no need to read too much into the timing of Obama's visit to Southeast Asia. By taking the trip, the US president wants to determine what his administration can do in the region and how. He also wants to know firsthand the attitude of East Asian countries toward the US, their relations with China and what they expect from Sino-US relations.

The US' strategic eastward shift is the result of the changing global power balance and reflects Washington's reluctance to be relegated to second place.

The US' eastward shift has many purposes. The first is to contain China. Using China's rise and the "China threat" theory, the US wants to convince China's neighbours that the Asia-Pacific needs Washington's presence and protection in order to "unite" them to strike a "strategic rebalance" against China in the

region.

The second is to consolidate the US-Japan alliance and tighten its grip over Japan and other allies.

The third is to avoid being "marginalised" in the fast developing free trade areas of the Asia-Pacific region and to maintain its importance in the region's economic integration.

And the fourth is to stimulate the regional arms race so that the American military-industrial complex could reap the benefits.

Some experts argue that the US seems to have won the first round of

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its strategic eastward shift, for China has been "isolated." Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The US may have gained the upper hand for the time being -- for example it has tightened its control over Japan and other allies, and its arms dealers are making big bucks. But in the competition for economic dominance, the US has not made much gain.

Washington has abandoned its drive to achieve the "Bogor Goals" of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's trade and investment liberalisation. Instead, it is trying to promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership with a higher degree of liberalisation than that recommended by the World

Trade Organisation. Until now, the new ambition remains a distant dream.

As far as containing China is concerned, there is much hue and cry without much success for the US. A recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* said that none of the countries neighbouring China is willing to join with Washington to confront Beijing. In fact, the spectre of an "Asian Nato" has been hovering around China without causing any real concern. The reason: China's neighbours are reluctant to take sides between Washington and Beijing for they want to develop relations with both.

It is true that maritime territorial disputes with some countries -- such as Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan -- have stirred trouble for China recently. But Vietnam is dependent on China economically and worried that the US will use the opportunity to engineer a "colour revolution" in the country. Anti-American sentiments run high in the Philippines, too, and Manila is worried Washington will use the dispute to its own advantage.

Japan is clearly the best partner of the US in the Asia-Pacific. But it cannot ignore the positive aspects of Sino-Japanese relations. Besides, it is also worried that the US will "manipulate" it to ultimately improve relations with China. The US, on its part, does not have complete faith in Japan and will by no means allow it to change its subordinate status in bilateral relations.

The US often says China and Russia, and even India, are "at a crossroads." In fact, it is the US that is now "at a crossroads." Its global

power is declining but it is reluctant to accept the fact. At the international level, it has no option but to see its influence shrink. In Sino-US relations, it has no option but to cooperate.

Obama is widely regarded as an intelligent leader. So if he learns firsthand how Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia view the US and Sino-US relations during his visit to the three countries, he might rethink some of Washington's policies.

China's rise is inevitable. It adheres to the road of peaceful development, and is committed to building harmonious relations, never seeking hegemony but standing for equal partnership and win-win cooperation. This is the core of Beijing's grand strategy and also the "magic weapon" to deal with the US' strategic eastward shift.

China does not feel uncomfortable about the US' presence in the Asia-Pacific; it merely hopes the US would make more active and positive contributions to the region.

Why is the US desperate to create conditions for Japanese right-wing forces to create trouble? It will not do any good to either the US or Japan.

In early 2011, Chinese and US leaders said no to the Cold War mentality and reached an important agreement on the direction bilateral relations should develop, and pledged to work together to build a Sino-US cooperative partnership based on mutual respect and mutual benefit. China has been making great efforts in this direction and hopefully Obama is also doing the same.

The writer is Executive Director, Strategy Research Centre, China International Studies Research Fund.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

November 20

1917

Ukraine is declared a republic.

1923

Rentemmark replaces the Papiermark as the official currency of Germany at the exchange rate of one Rentenmark to One Trillion (One Billion on the long scale) Papiermark

1945

Nuremberg Trials: Trials against 24 Nazi war criminals start at the Palace of Justice at Nuremberg.

1962

Cuban Missile Crisis ends: In response to the Soviet Union agreeing to remove its missiles from Cuba, U.S. President John F. Kennedy ends the quarantine of the Caribbean nation.

1977

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat becomes the first Arab leader to officially visit Israel, when he meets Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and speaks before the Knesset in Jerusalem, seeking a permanent peace settlement.