

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

The enigma that is Bangladesh



BANGLADESH is an amazing country. Here you have the flashes of rare feats and there you are having to deal with heartbreaking political depressions.

Twenty-year old Hasan making his debut as a pace bowler emerges as a super batsman at

number 10 with 113 runs to his credit against West Indies. He dusted and spruced up a 110-year old record of 104 runs scored by Reggie Duff of Australia against England to push it into a completely inanimate oblivion. That too in the fourth-highest 9th wicket partnership of 172 runs with Mahmudullah Riad.

This is a memorable rearguard action in world cricket in a class of its own. And, it comes from an entirely homegrown test debutant like a wild flower with exotic fragrance floating through the air enchanting all around him. We can pride ourselves on the potential reserve of raw talent waiting to be groomed up to world-class standards.

Then you have another delectable waft of balmy breeze from Salman Khan, a US citizen of Bangladeshi origin. He has made it to the cover of Forbes magazine. The magazine usually running cover stories on world's richest and most powerful people has made an exception by recognising Salman Khan's influence on education imparted on a totally non-profit basis. The title of the Forbes

story says it all: "One man, a computer, ten million learners: How Khan Academy has transformed education root and branch."

Our tribute to him is he is not after money. That is an example by itself in a country of his origin where every bit of power and position is employed in churning out money with a hormonal race of the body and mind.

Those are outstanding individual feats but here are some inner strengths of the country which have surfaced undeterred by dysfunctional politics.

The World Bank has termed development in Bangladesh as "an unsettling surprise." For the assumption in the first book written on Bangladesh economy in 1975 had been that

Bangladesh was a test case in development. If her problems could be solved then reasonably one could rest assured that solution of less complicated set of economic problems was possible.

The multilateral financing organisation analyses Bangladesh's development trend saying some countries have fared well in human development and others in terms of GDP growth. Of the few countries that have done well on both counts Bangladesh is one. This appellation comes following the release of

World Development Report 2013-A titled "Jobs."

British magazine The Economist, in its early November issue, used glowing terms in describing Bangladesh's socio-economic progress during the last two decades. It has dubbed the performance as "big and excellent." The primary foci are on containing baby boom close to net replacement rate, peaking of the working age people between 50+ and 59 envisioning opportunity for demographic dividends and making women central to development.

Nobel laureate

Amartya Sen has been consistently highlighting Bangladesh's progress in socio-economic indicators at a pace faster than in other South Asian countries. He recently said that such headways were not receiving the attention these should

have. Happily, the world has started taking notice of Bangladesh. As a pioneer in advocating brighter side of Bangladesh's image Amartya Sen should be happy to see a vindication of his opinion about us coming about.

In truth though, much of the good work done by our people is obscured through confrontational politics and its advancement impeded through corruption. All this signals instability and a hindrance to FDI flows. Moreover, severe traffic congestion in

the decision-making hub of Dhaka, multi-layered bureaucratic hurdles and inadequate infrastructure including erratic energy supply and port handling capacity stand in the way of attracting FDIs. The leaders have no time to turn to such concerns as they are submerged in ego-centric non-issues.

Bangladesh, or this part of the world, has attracted two historical descriptions, both carrying huge significance even to this day. "Mesmerised" knowing the people of the subcontinent during his invasion of India in 326 B.C., Alexander the Great told his General: "Satya Seleucus ... ki bichitro ei desh (really Seleucus, what an amazing country is this!)." It sounds like a total stranger's discovery of a people with all their idiosyncrasies. The "peculiarities" dawned on the conqueror emerging fresh from his guru Aristotle's orbit of philosophical influence. Alexander's remarks have gone down as a satire, rather than as a tribute.

The other historical description often referred to whenever Bangladesh is faced with a seemingly malignant anarchic situation is *Matsannya*. This means big fish devouring small fish. A total anarchy occurred following the death of Gour King Shshankya in 637 AD engulfing the state and society of Bengal until after the people chose Gopal as the king who turned the tide on Gour.

Leaders beware!

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High Commissioner of Canada to Bangladesh speaks

Her Excellency Heather Cruden, the High Commissioner for Canada in Bangladesh, in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Diplomatic Correspondent Rezaul Karim spoke about Canada-Bangladesh 40 years of diplomatic ties and bilateral cooperation in various fields. Following are excerpts from the interview.

REZAUL KARIM

THE Daily Star (TDS): This is the 40th year of diplomatic ties between Bangladesh and Canada. How do you foresee this relation developing further?

Heather Cruden (HC): I am honoured to be Canada's High Commissioner to Bangladesh during the 40th anniversary of our bilateral relationship. Our relationship includes development cooperation, commercial growth, cooperation in peace-keeping, support to democratic institutions as well as the beneficial influence of the up to 100,000 Bangladeshis living in Canada.

To celebrate the 40th anniversary, we have been organising several events in collaboration with local partners throughout the year; we want the people of this country to be part of this celebration.

TDS: What are the priorities you plan to emphasise during your assignment in this country?

HC: My priorities cover the full spectrum of our relationship. I hope our bilateral trade can reach Can\$ 2 billion. I would also like to see our trade relationship balance out as it is heavily weighed in Bangladesh's favour now.

I am committed to ensuring that our development partnership remains strong and that we can continue to invest in Bangladesh's future by creating opportunities for children and youth and stimulating sustainable economic growth.

I believe Bangladesh can find a way to hold a free, fair, credible, transparent, and inclusive election. However, it is also important to continue work towards a functioning parliament, vibrant civil society, freedom of speech and independent functioning institutions.

I look forward to fostering our relationship through both government-to-government and person-to-person relationships and continued partnership between our two nations now and in the future.

TDS: What are the major developments since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Canada in May 2011?

HC: Canada is committed to Commonwealth renewal and the strengthening of relationships based on shared values in the Commonwealth, and we look forward to continuing to work with Bangladesh to this end.

Canada and Bangladesh's bilateral trade has grown since 2011 helped in part by a successful Canada Showcase exhibition held in March 2012.

TDS: Many Bangladeshi immigrants don't get jobs matching their qualifications and work experience. What can be done to enhance their employability?

HC: The best approach for any potential immigrants should be to obtain Canadian qualifications. People interested in finding more about credential recognition may visit a government of Canada website which is set up to assist potential immigrants. The website address is: www.credentials.gc.ca

TDS: The Canadian development cooperation budget has undergone significant cuts. Will this affect aid to Bangladesh?

HC: I would like to stress that Canada's Budget 2012 confirmed that Canada's international development assistance will continue.

CIDA will maintain sufficient funding to reach our

development objectives. CIDA is also continuing to deliver on our Muskoka Initiative commitment to improve the health of mothers and children.

I understand that the aid budget for Bangladesh this year is expected to remain at current levels.

TDS: What can Canada do to assist Bangladesh in technology transfer and supporting research by local organisations?

HC: In 2011, Canada signed four memorandums of understanding with different universities in Bangladesh on various research projects. For example, one project is specifically working on pulse crop research and development. Another project is dealing with breast cancer research in Bagerhat district.

TDS: Why is Canada not sending back Nur Chowdhury, the convicted killer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman?

HC: I have to stress that Canada understands Bangladesh's interest in repatriating individuals convicted of crimes under Bangladeshi law. However, Canadian privacy laws prohibit the discussion of individual cases.

TDS: What are the major achievements of Bangladesh?

HC: Even though Bangladesh continues to face a range of challenges, the country has made important gains. Population growth rate and the incidence of poverty have steadily declined and the gross domestic product growth rate has averaged 6% per year. Considerable progress has also been made toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals, notably in health and education.

TDS: How can we reduce maternal mortality rate?

HC: On June 25, 2010 under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the leaders of the G-8 nations endorsed the Muskoka Initiative. Canada has committed \$ 1.1 billion in new funding between 2010 and 2015 under the Initiative, and will maintain the existing programme.

In Bangladesh, CIDA currently supports several projects in this sector. For example, the Can\$ 19.7 million Human Resources for Health Project aims to improve maternal and neonatal health status of poor women, girls and boys. This initiative provides technical assistance, equipment, and teaching and learning aids to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to improve the quality of education for nurse midwives and community skilled birth attendants. It also provides support to the ministry to rationalise the rules for recruiting, posting, promoting and training nurse midwives.

TDS: How is Canada working for good governance in Bangladesh?

HC: This is a really good question. Governance encompasses the values, rules, institutions, and processes through which people and organisations attempt to work towards common objectives, make decisions, generate authority and legitimacy, and exercise power.

The recent trend towards democracy, a critical element in good governance, has affected nearly every nation. Many countries have made significant gains in democratisation and are now working to establish stable and effective institutions, improve public sector management, reform legal and judicial systems, protect human rights, strengthen local civil society, and carry

out peace building after armed conflict.

Despite this progress, conflict, corruption, lack of respect for human rights (especially for women), and inadequate public services continue to challenge many countries.

There is a consensus internationally that the Millennium Development Goals cannot be reached without good governance, which Canada has identified as a cross cutting theme in its development cooperation programme. CIDA supports its partner countries' efforts -- including Bangladesh -- to create the conditions for secure, equitable development by promoting good governance.

In Bangladesh, CIDA's assistance includes key initiative such as strengthening Public Expenditure Management Program. This is an umbrella reform programme designed to enhance efficiency, effectiveness and accountability in the management and use of public funds in order to accelerate the implementation of national development priorities leading to greater poverty reduction and sustainable economic growth in Bangladesh. It is a five-year programme financed through a multi-donor trust fund administered by the World Bank.

Strengthening Comptrollership and Oversight of Public Expenditure: The purpose of this initiative is to increase the capacity of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Office in Bangladesh. We are helping them to fulfill their constitutional mandate to conduct independent audits and evaluations of public sector operations and provide reliable and objective information to Parliament on the government's financial management, compliance, and performance practices.

Parliamentary and Media Support: This is a collaborative project which promotes democratic governance based on an effective Parliament, professional media, and effective citizenship. The purpose is to strengthen institutions and processes that contribute to the free flow of information and allow direct and indirect interaction between citizens, elected representatives, and government officials. It helps create a framework for promoting active citizenship and public advocacy for effective and accountable government.

In the last general election, Canada contributed to the Transparent Ballot Boxes project. The boxes were one of the key demands of the major political parties and general population to ensure acceptance of fair elections.

In addition, through the Fair Elections and Institutional Reforms project, CIDA contributed to an enabling environment for a free, fair, and non-violent parliamentary election, in collaboration with the Asia Foundation, local civil society partner organisations (including the 34 member Election Working Group, the Bangladesh Election Commission, and other bilateral agencies).

TDS: How does the Canadian government ensure gender equity in its programmes?

HC: This is a priority for the government of Canada. For us, gender equality includes promoting the equal participation of women and men in making decisions; supporting women and girls so that they can fully exercise their rights; and reducing the gap between women's and men's access to and control of resources and the benefits of development.

If equitable and sustainable progress is to be achieved, women's status must be improved, their rights must be respected, and their contributions must be recognised. Gender equality results are systematically and explicitly integrated across all CIDA programmes.

A key initiative in this area in Bangladesh was the

Policy Leadership and Advocacy for Gender Equality (PLAGE) project, which strengthened the institutional framework and operational mechanisms that enhance the gender responsiveness of government policies and programmes, including by "engendering" the budget process.



High Commissioner Heather Cruden

TDS: A large number of students go for higher education in Canada. Does that make any difference to us?

HC: I think it is very exciting that Canada is a destination of choice for so many Bangladeshis for higher education. The ties between Bangladesh and Canada are also strengthened as we increasingly visit each other's countries.

Bangladeshi students who have completed studies in Canada have been exposed to the global economy in a new country, with a different culture, environment and lifestyle. They are also able to choose from a wide variety of programmes offered by Canadian educational institutions. All of this helps these graduates to contribute to the Bangladesh economy when they return. When youth are exposed to the richness of the cultural diversity, both countries benefit.

If you want more information, I would encourage you to visit the High Commission web site: www.bangladesh.gc.ca

TDS: What is your opinion about journalism and freedom of expression in Bangladesh?

HC: I am so glad you asked me this question. Canada values freedom of expression, which calls for a robust and independent media. Quality journalism has made major contributions to countries around the world and particularly to the growth of democracy and freedom. Journalists are friends of democracy.

For the last five years the High Commission and the Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism and Communication jointly organised "Canadian Awards for Excellence in Bangladesh Journalism" to recognise professional, high quality reporting. 42 journalists from the print, television and news agencies have received this award. I am so impressed by the number of news outlets -- print, radio or electronic -- that exist in Bangladesh.

TDS: Briefly, what impressions of Bangladesh will you take back with you?

HC: I have been personally impressed by how warm and welcoming Bangladeshis are. For me, it has been a wonderful posting to date as it has been very easy to meet and get to know a broad range of people who are passionate about their country and its potential. Bangladeshis are incredibly resilient and despite the challenges faced I think we all have great hope for Bangladesh's future. I should also highlight again that I believe it is a country of enormous potential particularly since one-third of its population are under 25. As we all know, youths are one of the agents of change. My term is 3 years in total and I am very much looking forward to the next 2 years.