

## KALEIDOSCOPE

## Thai-Bangla ties on a steadier course

*Shinawatra's visit provides impetus*

THE joint statement signed by prime ministers of Bangladesh and Thailand on Saturday at the conclusion of Yingluck Shinawatra's trip to Dhaka spells out a raft of decisions to take their relationship forward.

There are specific bilateral, regional and sub-regional components to the joint statement underlining the growing importance of partnering each other in changing regional and international scenarios. From Dhaka's point of view it's a reflection of its Look East policy. From the Thai side it sees the potential for partnership with a country that is steadily growing despite various constraints. For them it is connecting with a promising South Asian country.

An institutional framework exists between the two countries to enhance and diversify their cooperation in trade and investment. Bangladesh-Thailand joint commission has been assigned the task of making recommendations on specific areas of cooperation with a major focus on connectivity through increased regional cooperation and development of roads and shipping infrastructures. The two leaders acknowledging the important role of Bimstec in strengthening closer ties in South and Southeast Asia areas, one expects a revitalisation of Bimstec as powerful instrument of collective growth.

In specific terms, two memoranda of understanding (MOUs) have been signed to expand bilateral cooperation in agriculture and provide for regular consultation to strengthen friendly relations between the two countries.

Bilaterally, trade is aimed to double by 2016 with a rapid reduction in the trade imbalance. We believe it's a modest objective given that the inter-state trade grew by 65 per cent in FY 2010-11 alone compared with the level a year before. There is an unrealised scope to trade in a wider range of products and services.

New areas of cooperation may include infrastructure development, food processing and power generation. That both governments have agreed to explore possibilities of cooperation between their respective oil and gas companies to generate opportunities for exploration and production in Bangladesh augurs well. We also welcome Shinawatra's offer of technical assistance for indepth study for development of tourism and hospitality industry in Bangladesh.

We lend importance to both prime ministers underlining the significance of bilateral institutional arrangement for effective regulation of recruitment and employment processes. Good to know that Thailand will recruit Bangladeshi workers to work in its fishery sectors.

Finally, follow up actions will be key to implementation of the joint statement.

## Restricting newspaper in government offices

*A formula for living in a fool's paradise*

IN a stunning move the government has issued a circular directing all government offices including autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies to limit their subscription to five newspapers, three Bangla and two English. All the rest cannot be purchased at government cost.

The move is reminiscent of military autocrats and dictators who did not want the officials to read news and views critical of them. Such a policy, adopted by an elected government, can best be defined as undemocratic, vindictive and self-destructive.

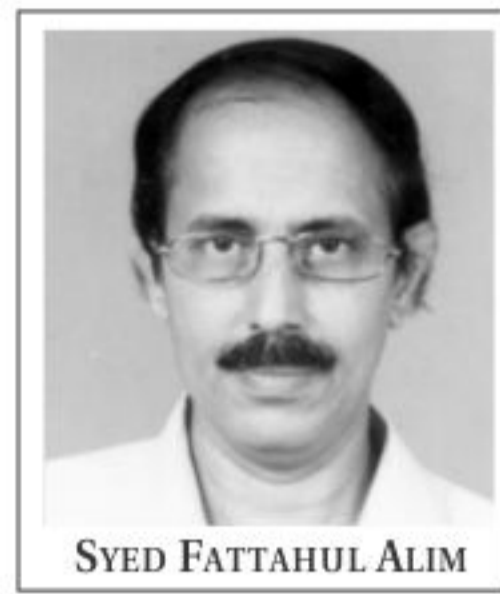
We can only characterise the decision of the government as vengeful and vicious, meant to 'punish' those newspapers that are not to their particular liking. And that portends a dangerous prospect. When a government chooses to read newspapers selectively, only those that praise it, and rejects those that are justifiably critical of its policies and actions, it leaves a government divorced from reality. And when there is a propensity to read what the government wants to read and not what it ought to read, it is a fantasy world that they create, a world far removed from reality.

Evidently, the message that the government is conveying is that it is neither ready nor willing to listen to alternative facts and views, they being unpalatable, and accept valid criticisms, without realising that such policy will sap its capacity to address issues of public interest appropriately, believing that everything is hunky-dory.

We would like to caution against the negative effect of patronizing newspapers that praise the government only, because that is a certain way of being isolated from the larger segment of public opinion and indeed the larger segment of the society. Leaving out some of the highest circulation newspapers in favour of others is not only waste of public money, it reveals the ostrich like attitude of the government. And even worse, it will deprive the policymakers and planners from reliable feed back which is so important for good governance.

The government needs to ponder as to why some papers are more widely read than others. Surely the circulation has to do with a paper's reliability, of its being informative, objective and constructive and trustworthy to the people. Need one be reminded that discriminatory policies with regard to newspapers, and controlling the flow of information, have in the long run proved counterproductive for

# Delhi rape shakes Indian politics: Dhaka should learn



SYED FATTAHUL ALIM

THE horrific gang rape of a 23 years old female physiotherapy student in a moving bus in New Delhi

on the night of December 16 has outraged India.

Both the lower (Lok Sabha) and the upper (Rajya Sabha) Houses of the bicameral Indian Parliament expressed deep shock and concern over the horrid incident. Demands were instantly raised for capital punishment for the perpetrators of the dastardly crime. The leader of the opposition Sushma Swaraj made a strong plea for capital punishment for this type of crime to which Congress leader Girija Vyas did not agree on the ground that such a measure might encourage offenders to kill the victim after rape. Aghast and ashamed that she was "not being able to do anything," the film star-turned politician and Samajwadi Party lawmaker of Rajya Sabha, Jaya Bachchan, broke down in tears on the floor of the House.

The parliamentary standing committee on home affairs, on the other hand, has convened a meeting on December 27 to discuss the issue of rape even with suggestions for effecting any change in the statute, if need be.

Dhaka, or Bangladesh for that matter, is also no stranger to gruesome rapes including gang rapes. Not

unlike India, most of those incidents of extreme violence against women remain largely unreported. Whatever comes to light through the media causes uproar among the general public, in the civil society and, of course, in the media. But that's all. Politicians here are, perhaps, far above such small matters. Unlike the politicians of Delhi, they hardly find any interest in these kinds of criminal incidents reported from every nook and cranny of the country with boring regularity to trigger any outcries or debates in parliament or making those issues of street agitation.

Finding no political favour, after

was abducted, gang raped and then killed and burnt. An accidental discovery of parts of her burnt remains helped her poor father to make a case out of those and thanks to the efforts of a human rights advocacy group, BSEHR, that the victim could finally be identified and the offenders brought to justice. During all those days that Barnali's poor parents fought to get justice for their gravely wronged daughter, we are not aware, if any politicians or representative of the government of the day were vocal against that outrage, or took any serious steps to stand beside the victim's family.

were killed. Worse yet, 21 of the victims were children below the age of 16.

Even as this piece is being written, parents of Thomaching Marma (13), the indigenous schoolgirl of Kawkhali in Rangamati, who was raped and strangled last Friday, are still wailing over the loss of their child. Has this horrific outrage that took place in a remote village in Bangladesh yet created any uproar in the media, the civil society, let alone among the politicians? Rather, victims like Thomaching, whether they are in Bangladesh, or in India, are relegated to mere numbers in the annual statistics on the reported cases of sexual assault against women in the country.

Given the magnitude of the violence of this type against women, the measures to combat this social menace need to be decisive and drastic. If politicians of India can take the case of Delhi paramedic student's case so seriously and hold stormy debates over it in parliament, why can't our politicians do the same over similar acts of violence against women in Bangladesh? Can't the major parties, the ruling Awami League, the opposition BNP and others, concentrate more on such social issues that affect the lives of the common people everyday than the exercise of mutual mudslinging they have grown so fond of? Actually, these are the issues they should better give more time to address to win the hearts of their constituents.

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some outcries in the media or among the rights groups for a week or two, the short-lived clamour dies down and we are again back to square one.

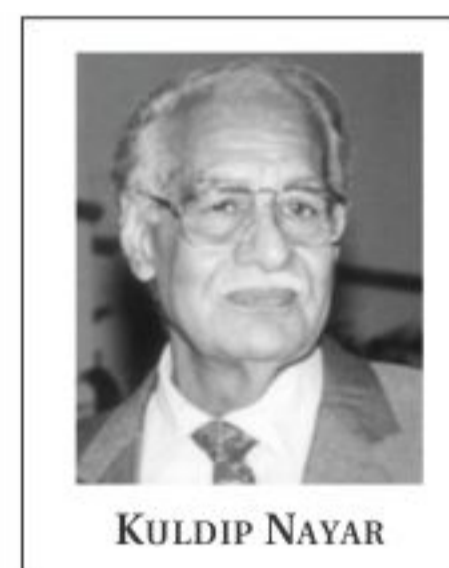
So many similar incidents of gang rape followed by killings have been taking place day in, day out across the country. It would be an injustice to other victims, if one tries to name a victim or two as a reference for discussion. Even so, we may recall here the case of Barnali Ghose, a 19 years old first year student of Azam Khan Commerce College in Khulna. On the fateful night of June 30, 2007, two days after she visited her village home in Rampal upazila of Bagerhat, she

Meanwhile, an elected government took office in January 2009, but women continue to be equally vulnerable to male violence as before.

Which is why in spite of the laws like Anti-Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980, Cruelty to Women Ordinance, 1983, Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1957, Prevention of Repression against Women and Children Act, 2000 -- all enshrined in the constitution -- the human rights organisation Odhakar in its October, 2012 report mentions that some 54 women were victims of rape in that month alone. Out of the victims, 5 were victims of gang rape, while two of those victims

## BETWEEN THE LINES

# Gain one, lose one



KULDIP NAVAR

GUJARAT going the way of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Himachal Pradesh to the Congress was expected even

before the first vote was cast in the two states. Although Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi has crossed old tally of 117, he must be disappointed that he did not get 145, the figure which the exit polls had projected and he had begun to cherish.

That the Congress has gained four or five seats is not a plus point because the incumbency factor and the revolt by Keshubai Patel, till recently a top BJP leader, should have cut into Modi's strength. That he still has two-thirds of a majority in the 182-member house does not speak well of the Congress, which had its top leaders campaigning in the state and enticing the Muslims and tribals.

Indeed, the corruption factor has worked against the BJP in Himachal. Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal had charges against him, even though his governance had wide acclamation. It seems that Himachal is following the pattern of Tamil Nadu where the DMK and the AIADMK are elected alternately.

I fail to comprehend what message does Gujarat convey to the rest of India by re-electing Modi? This is his victory and that of his views which are out of tune with the 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking. Democracy also means pluralism. All people are equal before the law, whatever their religion or caste. Modi cares little about such ideas or values.

True, the middle class, which constitutes a majority in Gujarat, wants a polity which enables it to earn more,

enjoy more comforts and give it normalcy even though on surface. It seldom questions the rulers and virtually never challenges the wisdom of their deeds. Yet, the middle class does not realize -- or care -- that Modi is authoritarian, like the late prime minister Indira Gandhi, and his anti-Muslim bias is so strong that he did not field even a single Muslim candidate.

I do not grudge Modi and his party, the BJP, the sweep in the state. But is it the kind of India we want to build, a society sans secularism? Mahatma Gandhi, who led the freedom struggle and who was himself a Gujarati, said that Hindus and Muslims were his two eyes. He would take out *prabahar pheris* selling *khadi* in the morning on Ahmedabad's streets, which had killers and looters walking in 2002. The British *lathi*-charged peaceful processions, but in Modi's regime the police connived at what the fanatics did.

The same Gujarat saw ethnic cleansing, planned and executed by the Hindutva exponents under Modi's guidance. How some 17 crore Muslims in the country would have felt when Modi's electoral fight was parochial? Gandhiji had a different approach and sacrificed his life at the hand of a Hindu fanatic. Granted that Modi's campaigns never mentioned the Muslim community by name, yet he used *mian* before the name of Ahmed Patel, Congress President Sonia Gandhi's political adviser. Modi played the anti-Pakistan card by introducing the Sir Creek dispute two

days before polling.

He wrote a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh not to hand over the Sir Creek, a narrow bay, to Pakistan and alleged that the visit of its Interior Minister, Rehman Malik, to Delhi during the Gujarat polls was in that connection. The prime minister himself made it clear that there was no such a move. Finance Minister P. Chidambaram characterised Modi's assertion ridiculous and a fig of imagination. But the harm had been done. The fence sitters went to the Modi's side to "save" Sir Creek. In fact, the Election Commission should

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look into his tactics to win. The Gujarat chief minister claims that he won because of developments he effected in the state. What kind of development is it when the Muslims have become poorer and even the riot victims have

not been rehabilitated? There is no drinking water, no roads, no municipal facilities in their areas. Also, the *adivasis* have remained marginalised and tribals have not benefited in any way.

It is the middle class, both in cities and countryside, which has been the gainer and, therefore, it is not surprising that it has voted en bloc for Modi. In contrast, Dhumal has been jettisoned by the growing middle class in Himachal. It is healthy sign that the middle class is asserting itself. But it is unfortunate that it has not yet risen from its parochial moorings. In Himachal, the distance between the

Punjabi and the indigenous population seems to have counted a lot.

While the defeat of Dhumal will only be registered by the BJP high command, the victory by Modi is going to create problems for the party. Already the posters appearing in Gujarat suggest that the "state's *sher* (lion) will become India's *sher*." This means that Modi is prepared for a national role which may not be liked by some of the top leaders of the party. Not long ago, its President Nitin Gadkari told me that there were too many aspirants in his party for the prime minister's post. It is an open secret that Gadkari and Modi do not see eye to eye. Since the RSS, the BJP's mentor, is backing Modi he would be a formidable candidate.

Where Modi may be stumped is the dislike for his way of politics and the categorical anti-Muslim view that scares away many in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). One of its leaders and chief minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, has conceded that the BJP, the NDA's senior party, has the right to choose the leader but he has to be a consensus candidate. Modi may not make the choice because apart from the NDA allies, the country on the whole will feel horrified even at the mere mention of his name.

Both Gujarat and Himachal are straws in the wind. It cannot be taken for granted that the states ruled by the BJP would return its party candidates to parliament in the next election in 2014. It is a pity that the nation has to choose between the Congress and the BJP in the absence of an alternative. People's movements throughout the country should get together and rescue the nation from mis-governance and corruption which has been the hallmark of rule by the two parties.

The writer is an eminent Indian journalist.