

## CROSS TALK

# At least two billion must rise

## Metro rail at long last!

*Still a long way to go*

**A**FTER much trepidation and wrangling over proposed routes, Bangladesh and Japan formally signed a loan agreement on February 20 to build the much-awaited metro rail in the capital city. The total loan worth \$792.82 million from Japan is for four major projects, of which metro rail is one. The most significant element of this deal is the fact that it is a soft loan that is payable over a 40-year term with a 10-year grace period before the first payment is due.

Bangladesh will be receiving in the current fiscal year \$116.32 million for the metro rail project. This will help fund a detail design of the 20.1 km rail project. Needless to say this is good news for vehicle-choked Dhaka city residents. With links stretching from Uttara Third Phase to Motijheel and stoppages at important junctions like Pallabi, Mirpur-10, Khamarbari, Farmgate, Sonargaon Hotel, Shahbagh, Doel Chattar and Tophkhana Road, the fast-paced rail service promises traffic and hassle-free transportation of bulk people in Dhaka.

What is important to note is that the completion timeframe for the project has been reduced from 26 to 10 years. The metro rail project is significant not only in helping ease traffic congestions as more and more people will avoid commuting to commercial areas using cars. It is estimated that a single line metro rail has the capacity to move 400,000 commuters from Uttara to Motijheel or vice-versa in a mere 36 minutes. Those are significant numbers by any standard. Given the timeline for project completion, Dhaka residents would undoubtedly have been better served had the loan negotiations for MRT not taken so many years. But the fact that it has finally gotten off the ground is certainly something to look forward to and we certainly appreciate Japan's wholehearted assistance in the matter.

## Enhancing regional cooperation

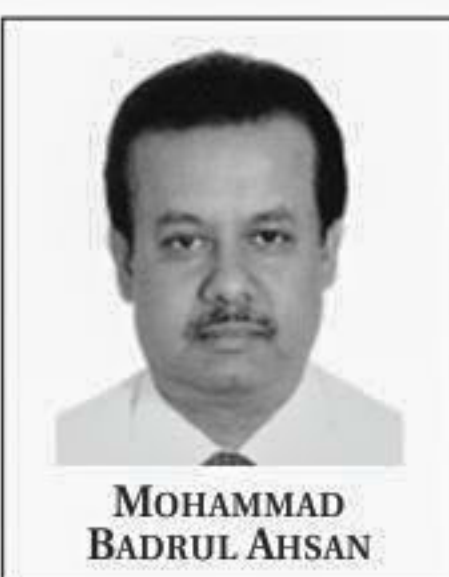
*Bangladesh geographically ideally placed for it*

**D**HAKA plays host to a two-day conference on February 23-24 that brings together some fifty analysts from Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) focusing primarily on trade, investment and finance, multimodal connectivity, energy and institutional arrangements. The conference hosted by a local think-tank believes that Bangladesh's unique geographical position could offer new possibilities and opportunities for regional cooperation.

The combined population of BCIM countries provides a market of nearly 2.8 billion people and a GDP worth \$9.3 trillion. The Dhaka meet is the 11th of its kind and there is broad consensus in the BCIM region that there is scope for strengthening cooperation in trade, investment and finance; addressing multimodal connectivity and cross-border energy cooperation among forum member countries. Bangladesh which is situated at a strategic location is sorely lacking in a number of areas that include infrastructure and power.

The BCIM Forum countries that include the two regional economic superpowers China and India offers significant new opportunities for other nations like Bangladesh. Areas of interest may include the search for institutional support particularly in addressing financing for major infrastructure projects like building the largely stalled deep-sea port. The significance of a closely-knit forum formed on the principle of building a platform to promote and deepen regional and sub-regional cooperation among the four nations cannot be overstated. New opportunities have presented themselves with Myanmar being touted as "the next Asian tiger" led by a reformist-minded government opening up the economy through liberalisation and FDI regimes.

In the final analysis of things, should reforms continue in Myanmar, BCIM could provide the impetus needed for more extensive cooperation among member countries to reduce lead time, raise trade competitiveness, attract investment and create opportunities for development of



MOHAMMAD  
BADRUL AHSAN

**S**PIDERS can teach a few things about this cruel world. Black widow spiders have their females who eat male

partners after mating. The wolf spider species have been observed to cannibalise on older females, while preferring mating with virgins. Then there is this European species whose offsprings eat their mothers. Rape committed by men would have been a similar freak of nature if the rapists, for the life of me, could explain how they can respect their own mothers, wives, sisters and daughters after they violate those of others.

Women around the world themselves have been striving to reconcile that quandary. Throughout modern history, numerous movements have emerged in the wake of their efforts to find a remedy. Activist Emma Goldman and American playwright Eve Ensler got together fifteen years ago to launch yet another but a more organised movement. They call it "One Billion Rising," which, every year on the Valentine's Day, organises events worldwide to increase awareness, raise money, and revitalise the spirit of existing anti-violence organisations.

So, they are not only talking about rape, but violence against women

including beating. This is where the matter gets complicated. Some men beat their own women and domestic violence is common in all countries. There are other men who like to abuse the women of others. It's hard to tell how many men under both categories are involved in these despicable crimes.

But the number of women who are victims is estimable. The UN says that one out of three women on the planet will be beaten or raped in her lifetime. Since the world has approximately three billion women, one-third of that is roughly one billion, which is what formed the title of the V-Day movement. The movement claims to have made some progress. It has broken taboos by speaking the word "vagina" in 50 languages in 140 countries. Amongst other things, it has exposed many incidents of violence against women, helped women speak up in many countries and its activists across the planet have created and changed laws.

But how far has that worked to curb violence against women? The latest statistics from a number of countries show that incidence of rapes has fluctuated across the

world, going up in some and going down in others. What about domestic violence and physical abuse of women? The latest figures available don't look encouraging.

Between them, male and female genders appear to be historically locked in an endless tension. Perhaps a great deal of it is natural. Perhaps it's driven by their impulses and instincts since every individual is a product of his and her wiring, reacting to the world according to their internal combustion. That is why not all men are abusive. There are men who open car doors for their women, pull chairs for them at dinner tables, hold doors open ahead of them, buy flowers and gifts on anniversaries and share conjugal life on an equal footing. There are plenty of romantic men, who make it a purpose in life to love their women.

A crime is perhaps as good or as bad as punishment. Deep in the heart of Jharkhand in India, the Ho tribesmen punish a rapist by forcing him to give a goat or some cockerels to the victim's family. Even in this country, rapes are resolved by asking a rapist to marry his victim or giving compensation in cash or

kind, mostly a plot of land in the name of girl's family.

In domestic violence, cruelty gets crueler. Mindless men take out their anger on wretched wives. Rape is a crime that is more defined and the enemy is clearly identified. And, most of the time the perpetrators of this crime are complete strangers. Cruelty hurts more when it comes from the loved ones. Pain is more painful when the hands that are meant to care and protect indulge in oppression.

Scientists speculate that there is an element of sacrifice in the cruelty of spiders. Once a male has mated, he is unlikely to mate again. Thus his life can be more useful if he is consumed by his partner to provide nutrition to her eggs.

Human cruelty has no sublime goal but to draw pleasure from the pains of others. This cruelty has many faces as it also has many forms. Whether done to animals, humans or nature, cruelty only provides nutrition to its own horror.

There are seven billion people in this world, and "One Billion Rising" is only a symptom of the sickness, not its cure. If violence against women is showing no respite, it's probably either because the number of men who cannot love women has remained unchanged or increased. Roughly half-and-half in distribution, at least one billion men have to join one billion women to make it work.

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# The destiny of Bangladesh

FAIZ SOBHAN

**S**INCE February 5, thousands of people have gathered in Shahbagh protesting Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah's life sentence handed down by the International War Crimes Tribunal, and calling for the death sentence for him and all the other 1971 war criminals on trial. Emotions are running high and a strong feeling of nationalism is clearly visible in the thronging crowds assembled in what has now been dubbed, "Projonmo Chattar" or "Generation Square."

While these protests may have taken many by surprise, it is not something unusual as Bangladeshis have always been infused with a political zeal which has run through their veins through generations. While the protests at "Generation Square" are not the same as those seen at Tahrir Square in Cairo, the common link between the two is that in both cases it is largely the younger members of society who are dominating the proceedings and have been the most vocal in expressing their views and sentiments.

However, the larger question that looms in the minds of many Bangladeshis is the burning question of what is the destiny of Bangladesh? What direction is it heading in? Where will Bangladesh be politically, socially and economically in 10, 20 or 50 years? Since its independence, Bangladesh has surprised many with the progress it has achieved despite the manifold obstacles, calamities and problems it had to face.

Looking ahead, the 160 million people of Bangladesh, in particular the younger generation, are entitled to ask, what kind of nation do we want to be? How do we rekindle the spirit of 1971 in a way that contributes significantly to the progress of the country and fulfills the aspirations of the younger generation? Do we want to become the next Singapore or South Korea or are we content with the current rate of progress? These answers can only

come after some deep introspection and a healthy discourse by all Bangladeshis, including those living abroad.

There is no certainty that Bangladesh will become the next Singapore or South Korea in 20 or 30 years, but there is the guarantee that it can at least partially achieve its objective of meeting that goal. It is understandable that a country like Bangladesh, which still suffers from poverty, lack of natural resources, weak infrastructure, poor governance, corruption, over-population, rapid urbanisation, natural disasters and numerous other challenges, cannot be expected to become an overnight success. But we must also be mindful of the position Singapore and South Korea were in fifty years ago and where they are today. There was no magic formula that propelled them to their stellar political, economic and social success that they experience today. It took years of hard work, dedication, dynamism and desire to reach the point they have.

There has been enormous progress made in the socio-economic development arena since Bangladesh's independence nearly 42 years ago, moreover the fact remains that there is still a long way to go in terms of concrete progress. For instance, between 1980 and 2010, the UN Human Development Index (HDI) grew by 81%, making Bangladesh one of the fastest growing developing countries in the world. Putting that in perspective and taking into consideration the series of devastating natural disasters, overpopulation, poor infrastructure and weak governance, the growth in HDI is an incredible achievement. This growth would not have been possible without the combined efforts of the government, the vast NGO sector and the assistance provided by our development partners.

In a recent article, *The Economist* news magazine was glowing in its praise of Bangladesh's socio-economic progress since its independence; it complimented Bangladesh on being able to lift millions of people out of poverty. It cited the remarkable progress in declining child and maternal mortality. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen remarked recently that Bangladesh had surpassed India in "every parameter of human development" due largely to gender-based equality.

Despite enormous strides in the social and economic sphere, the central question still remains: where will Bangladesh be in 2023 or 2033? Are we likely to see a nation on the rise due to greater economic and social growth and improved governance? Are we likely to see a much better allocation of resources and better infrastructure, with improved connectivity providing more roads, highways, bridges, commuter trains and buses

enabling hassle-free and quick access across the country? Will greater maturity and wisdom be exercised in politics? Will a younger generation choose to put aside party differences and ideologies for the betterment of their country and work towards improving livelihoods, especially of those still below the poverty line? I like to imagine the answers to all of these are an unequivocal "yes" but with a caveat.

Politicians, the private sector, the armed forces, civil society, NGOs and those members of society who are able to play a direct or indirect role in making their country stronger and more dynamic, must pause for a moment and question their conscience, and ask themselves if they have that true sense of patriotism and selflessness to commit themselves to making things better

for their country and its people.

At the end of the day, there has to be a collective and whole-hearted wish to bring about change for the better. If that inherent desire is missing and the aim is to gain power and influence and make money unlawfully, Bangladesh will be unable to reach new heights of prosperity. It will continue to make slow progress and, in the end, it will fall even further behind other developing countries which have been successful in improving the quality of governance in their respective countries.

There should be no reason why a country like Bangladesh, geographically situated at a strategic point which links South and Southeast Asia, cannot become a rising tiger economy. Government figures state that there are about 8 million Bangladeshi overseas workers in more than 155 countries, who remit over \$14 billion in 2012.

Bangladesh has also become one of the world's leading exporters of ready-made garments, ranking second in the world after China. According to a recent McKinsey report, its apparel exports could cross \$36 billion by 2020. Goldman Sachs branded Bangladesh as one of its Next 11 economies after the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries. In addition, JP Morgan identified Bangladesh as a "Frontier Five" economy. Standard & Poor's and Moody's have rated Bangladesh, apart from India, ahead of all the other countries in South Asia.

The first requirement for Bangladesh, however, should be to get its house in order.

Positive thinking can beget positive results. Even if one person in a thousand can contribute constructively, that would have a tremendous impact in a country of over 160 million nationals. One must not underestimate the triumphant spirit of the people of Bangladesh or their capacity to be decent and upright citizens. In sum, the destiny of Bangladesh is in the hands of its people.

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(This article reflects the writer's personal views.)

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 22

**1848**  
The French Revolution of 1848, which would lead to the establishment of the French Second Republic, begins.

**1948**  
Communist revolution in Czechoslovakia.

**1958**  
Egypt and Syria join to form the United Arab Republic.

**1973**  
Cold War: Following President Richard Nixon's visit to the People's Republic of China, the two countries agree to establish liaison offices.

**1974**  
The Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit begins in Lahore, Pakistan. Thirty-seven countries attend and twenty-two heads of state and government participate. It also recognizes Bangladesh.

**1986**  
Start of the People Power Revolution in the Philippines.