

# US's suspension of GSP facility

## Meet the challenge head-on

THE US government's decision to suspend Generalised System of Preference (GSP) facility for Bangladesh has disappointed us. It is undoubtedly unfortunate, and our government has given its reaction in so many words.

As the rationale, the US has cited its concern over labour rights and workers' safety in Bangladesh.

We had hoped that such an eventuality would be averted given Bangladesh's redoubled efforts to raise labour rights and safety standards in the recent months.

Even so, there is no reason for us to be overly upset about this coming from one of our biggest global trading partners.

As only less than one per cent of the total annual volume of Bangladeshi exports worth around \$5 billion to the US market will be affected, the US measure, in effect, is going to have a symbolic rather than a quantitative impact on the trade between the two countries. But there is every reason to take the US step seriously, since it may affect our reputation in the US, European and other international markets negatively.

However, it is only suspension rather than outright withdrawal of the facility as such. For there will be review of the situation and possibility of resumption of the facility depending on our progress in terms of meeting compliance standards.

We should be complying with the labour rights and safety standards of our own volition. It is in our best interest to do so.

# Maritime security

## IMO support to complement local capacity

THE government is looking to International Maritime Organization (IMO) for support in sustainable growth of Bangladesh's marine institutions. Though the maritime sector in the country is a crucial one, more focus needs to be given on capacity building, quality of maritime education, and on ensuring environmental protection for maritime safety and security. Foreign Minister Dipu Moni made this request to the visiting IMO Secretary General Koji Sekimizu.

As Bangladesh is a country that deals with the negative impacts of climate change it is important that safety and security measures and training are given to the maritime employees and students. The institutions need updating of their curriculum taking into consideration the circumstances of Bangladesh. We have a very promising maritime sector, and the shipbuilding industry is also an area of development in the country. Proper training and environmental safety measures will also encourage more Bangladeshis to join this sector, which will increase livelihood options for the country in general.

Without further ado, our government, the shipbuilding industry and the maritime institutions need to put their minds together and develop an environmentally sustainable, economic-growth-friendly and livelihood options-creating plan and put it into implementation. We can seek help from IMO and other international organizations but we cannot delay the process of this growth by depending on others.

# The tragedy of modern India

EDITORIAL DESK: THE STATESMAN

CONTROVERSIES may rage as strong as the deluge-fed Himalayan torrents over the "larger issues" that contributed to the devastation in Uttarakhand. But there is unquestioned acceptance of what passes as the local administration having simply collapsed -- and the "unprecedented" nature of the downpour is a poor alibi.

A common theme runs through the lament of the suffering: had it not been for India's military and paramilitary there would have been virtually no rescue action. The district authorities had neither the determination nor the means to handle a situation of much lesser proportions.

This is a collective shame on the governments of varying political composition of the young state, indeed of the Uttar Pradesh government of the previous era. For a state that derives a considerable share of its income from temple tourism and other visitors there is something callous about the way the victims were left to fend for themselves, exploited even to the extent of being mugged, or worse.

The hill roads and bridges were in a poor state of maintenance, no upgrades despite the massive increase in traffic after less-than-legally constructed accommodation was made available to pilgrims whose belief that their faith was protection was cruelly shattered. Incompetent officials and self-serving politicians have proved a lethal blend.

Sadly, the malaise is not Uttarakhand-specific. Almost every centre of pilgrimage -- and regardless of religion or denomination India has such centres in abundance -- has reported a tragedy in recent years: it makes little difference if what triggered the calamity was a natural force or human mismanagement. The quality of the local administration has been corroded over the years.

Increasing responsibilities are thrust on antiquated "machinery" that has not been overhauled since the colonial era, let alone upgraded or modernised. Politicians and top-heavy secretariats draw up several new "schemes" each year to "sell" to the people in return for their votes without putting a delivery system in place.

Will the National Disaster Management Agency honestly assess what degree of difference it has made to equipping and training local officials in relief and rescue duties -- after all it is the Collector and Tehsildar, or whatever they are locally designated, who are the "first line of defence."

A parallel could well be drawn to the creation of "hubs" of the specialised National Security Guard when cops with lathis and antiquated revolvers first face terrorists. The "system" simply does not ensure that efficacy trickles down.

Quite simply, a bottom-feeding Indian bureaucracy creates organisations only to keep itself engaged and with no desire to do good. More organisations means more taxpayers' money to burn with little of substance to show in return. This is the tragedy of modern India.

# Muslim identity in subcontinental politics

## STRAIGHT LINE



MUHAMMAD  
NURUL HUDA

THE mainstream Indian nationalism under the stewardship of the Indian National Congress was first challenged by the Muslims. Muslim leaders could see that the Congress failed to maintain its separation from the blooming Hindu nationalism. In spite of the important differences, both demographic and sectarian, of the Muslim community spread over the subcontinent, it was the British colonial rule that conjured up an image of homogeneous "religiopolitical community" of the Indian Muslims.

The colonial rule ignored the finer distinctions in regional philosophical orientations of South Asian Islam. A section of the Muslim population "began to see themselves in the colonial image of being unified, cohesive, and segregated from Hindus." Muslim leaders started constructing a Muslim community identity that was later enlarged into Muslim nationhood.

The Indian colonial census made religion its fundamental ethnographic category for ordering and classifying demographic and developmental data. Each census report sought to give concrete and recognisable shape to the religious communities indicating their majority or minority status in each region and the country as a whole. The break-up of literacy and occupational statistics, religion-wise provided an objective picture of the relative or comparative material and social conditions of each religious community. The result of this census taxonomy was the new concept of "religion as a community."

Religion came to be identified with "an aggregate of individuals united by formal official definition." The colonial knowledge of redefined religion was incorporated into every structure that the state created, every opportunity that it offered to the colonial subjects -- from educational facilities, public employment, representation in local self-governing bodies to entry into the expanded legislative councils. Thus, relationship between religious groups was reconstituted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century India.

As Hindu mobilisation made progress, it also simultaneously sculpted and vilified its 'other,' the Muslims. The Muslims began to discover their community identity informed by their common religion and an invented shared past. An aggressive Arya Samaj movement contributed to the counter-mobilisation of the Muslims in urban Punjab.

In the countryside, too, Islam penetrated rural politics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through such intermediaries as the *sajjad nishius*, *pirs* and the *ulama*. In Bengal, particularly as the frontier of cultivation expanded between 16th and 18th century, Islam also spread as the "religion of the plough," bringing local people gradually into its fold. Under the leadership of a section of Bengali speaking Muslim literati and religious preachers (*pirs*), Islam in Bengal in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries acquired a syncretistic face.

In all the regions of India, Muslims suffered from a sense of relative deprivation in comparison with Hindus. This feeling was shared differently by the richer and poorer sections of the community. However, when the political mobilisation of the Muslims began, the interests of the peasants came to be subordinated to the interests of the elites, which were projected as the interests of the entire community.

Among the Bengal Muslims a distinct Muslim identity had been developing at a mass level from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through various Islamic reform movements. These movements sought to purge whatever they thought to be of un-Islamic origin. This gave the lower orders or the *atrap* a sense of social mobility. This was developed through various agencies, such as the itinerant mullahs, the *bahas* (religious meetings and the *anjumans* (local associations)). This process helped in political mobilisation and in strengthening the argument about separate Muslim interests.

The elite Muslim leaders soon linked this new sentiment to the relative backward condition of Muslims and to

the need of organising themselves as a political pressure group to demand their just share of the institutional opportunities created by the colonial rule. The first Muslim organisation in Bengal was the Mohammedan Association, or the Anjuman-I-Islam, in 1855. Thus, the essentials of Muslim politics had taken shape in Bengal even before the more well known Sayyid Ahmed Khan's movement was started in UP. The Muslims of Bengal became conscious of the political implications of their number and the necessity of social mobilisation across cultural barriers.

The easiest way to forge horizontal solidarity was to harp on the common faith, and the mullahs through the local anjumans carried the urban message to the countryside. Around 1905, almost all major towns in Bengal had local *anjumans*. Close collaboration between the educated Muslims and the mullahs was a distinctive feature of the small town *anjumans*. Those *anjumans* forged a link between the urban elites and the rural masses and thus brought the latter into the larger political conflict.

Extremist politics and Hindu revivalism further facilitated Muslim mobilisation by reinforcing the social fault lines. The Hindu *bhadrolok* in Bengal often looked down upon the Muslims with contempt. The Hindu *jatras* (rural theatrical performances) often indulged in vilification of Muslim historical persona, which was not very lightly taken by the *anjumans* or the mullahs. The cumulative effect of all those factors was the accumulation of social tension, which ultimately culminated in communal tension.

The social separation of the two communities was further politicised by the Swadeshi leaders freely using Hindu religious symbols and coercing Muslim peasants to observe boycott. They unwittingly allowed the movement to grow into a Hindu-Muslim question. Instead of having a secular approach to the political issue, they constantly

harped that the Muslims were being given extra privileges at the expense of the Hindus. The Swadeshi movement put on the Muslims the unmistakable stamp of 'otherness.' Therefore, in no time the anti-partition agitation appeared in Muslim consciousness as an anti-Muslim campaign. The Bengali Muslim Society, both the elites and their peasant followers had begun to pull in a different direction.

In north India, in late 19<sup>th</sup> century a variety of locally instituted bodies, such as *anjumans*, neighbourhood *akhras*, and festival committees got involved in popular cultural activities that gradually constructed the cultural identities based on a symbolic religious vocabulary. The crafting of a "religiously informed cultural identity" was taking definite shape. Such reconstructed cultural identity was later deployed in the institutional politics of identity.

Aligarh College was a "profoundly political enterprise" that succeeded in producing an ethos of solidarity in educated Muslim minds. Added to this was the direct opposition to the Congress strategy, which Sir Sayyid thought was an attempt to organise and consolidate the Hindu majority electorate to dominate over the Muslim minority in the new representative bodies and civil services. This majority phobia increased further because of the cow-killing riots of 1893, the Hindu demand for legal ban on cow-slaughter and Congress silence about it.

The inadequacies of Sir Sayyid's loyalist politics gave rise to the urgent need for a political organisation for the Muslims in order to mobilise the community against the Congress and to also offer an independent political platform. The possibility of Bengal partition being rescinded made the Bengal Muslim leadership panicky.

The Bengali Muslims were always more politicised than their north Indian counterparts, and after all it was the Bengal situation of 1906 that had acted as a catalyst in bringing into existence the new Muslim party. The granting of separate electorate for the Muslims in 1909 provided an official legitimacy to the minority status and the separate political identity of the Indian Muslims, with Muslim League representing its public face. The subsequent evolution of this Muslim identity from minority status to nationhood took a long and tortuous trajectory.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.

# Suspension of US GSP: What does this mean for Bangladesh?

SHAFIN FATTAH

THE US government suspended Bangladesh from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) which allows duty-free entry of over 5,000 goods to the US market from least developed countries. This action comes as a result of Bangladesh government's failure to improve working conditions in the country. Although Washington based lobbyists have been making a case for Bangladesh's suspension for about a year now, the US government finally gave in to their demands after over 1,100 workers died in a tragic factory collapse earlier this year. What does this suspension mean for Bangladesh and its growing economy?

The probable financial loss in terms of falling export may be very small, at least in the short run. As RMG products (which make up most of the US import from Bangladesh) are not included in the list of duty-free products in GSP, there will be an export fall of about \$40 million according to Charles Kernaghan, executive director of Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights. At present, Bangladesh exports about \$5 billion worth of goods (mostly RMG products) to the USA every year and hence, the suspension from US GSP will account for a fall in export of about 0.8%.

However, this \$40 million will translate to export loss for some small industries in the country, namely, ceramic products, tobacco, etc. Since global export of products from these industries are very small compared to that of RMG sector, this \$40 million export fall will make up a much larger proportion total export for these small industries. However, the GSP Program is set to expire on July 31, 2013. It may take some time before Congress renews the programme and so short-run tariff on these goods was inevitable. It will be interesting to wait and see whether these exported items make it back to the list of the GSP Program.

More importantly, Bangladesh's image as a trade partner of the USA is tainted. This may discourage US and other foreign investors, new and old, from venturing into Bangladesh, which may have a moderate effect on the prospect of future export growth of the country, particu-

larly in US market.

The biggest short-run fear for the country will be to see a similar action adopted by European Union. EU had previously threatened to remove preferential access of Bangladeshi RMG products in EU market if the government did not take measures to improve the working condition in Bangladesh factories. Bangladesh RMG export to EU grew to about \$11.37 billion as of June 2012. Hence, such an action will be devastating for the country's RMG sector which exported about \$19 billion dollar worth of products in the last fiscal year and employs about 4.5 million people at the bottom of the population pyramid, 80 % of whom are women.

Thus, there will be increasing pressure on the government to improve working condition as EU will be closely observing Bangladesh. Several European importers have already come forward to help the country in improving safety features of RMG factories, which is a good sign for the country.

The interesting point to take into account here is America's lack of effort in coming forward to help Bangladesh to improve its working conditions since April's Rana Plaza collapse. So far, main US importers like Walmart have not made any concrete commitment to improve the working conditions of the factories from which they import clothes for their outlets. Disney has terminated its RMG import from Bangladesh. Interestingly, the US government has always charged a rather hefty tariff from Bangladesh and other countries' RMG export. In 2010, Bangladeshi RMG export faced a tariff about \$650 million (which was about 17% of the total 2010 RMG export value).

To conclude, this suspension from US GSP is little more than a symbolic action by the US government to punish the factories concerned for the recent RMG factory tragedies. All eyes are now on the Bangladeshi government and US importers that source apparel from Bangladesh. So far, neither has taken any major initiative to address the poor working conditions in Bangladeshi RMG sector.

The writer is a third-year Economics student at Princeton University, USA. He can be reached at @shafinfattah on twitter

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## “Guerrilla war over Grameen”

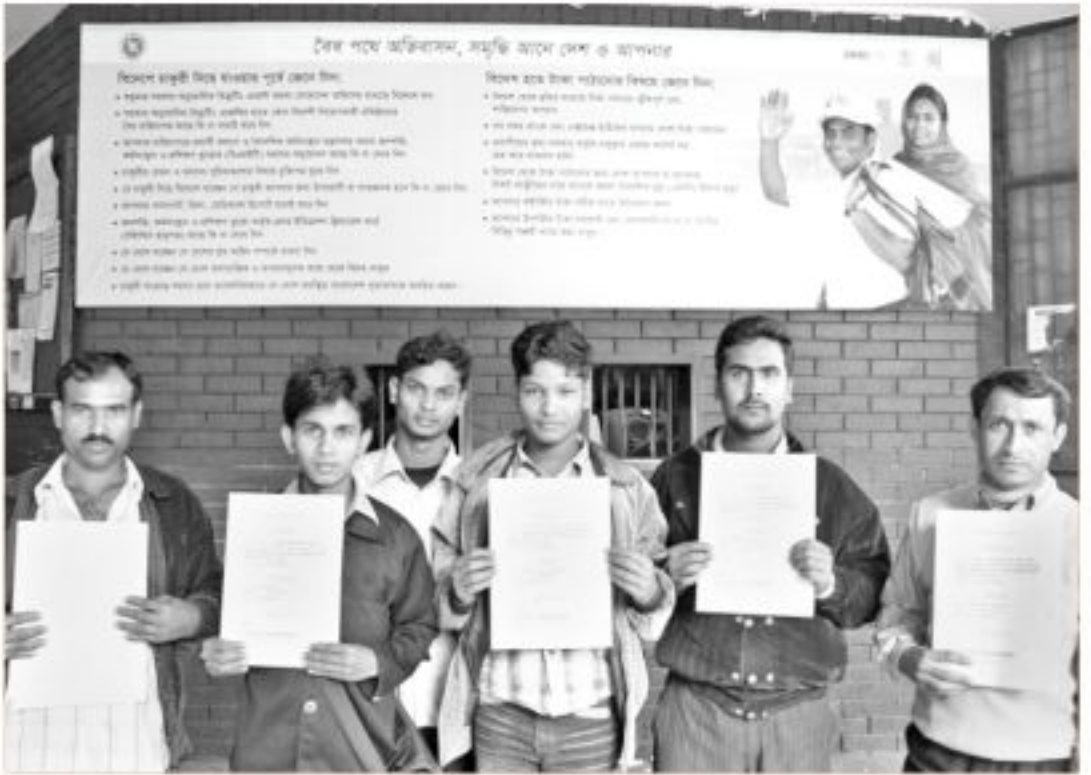
With much concern I have gone through the article bearing the above title by Syed Badrul Ahsan published in TDS on June 21.

It is internationally recognised that the banking system of Grameen, innovated by Dr. Yunus, is an effective approach to empower rural poor and strengthen rural economy. Many countries of the world have replicated this banking system which is yielding a positive impact on their socio-economic condition.

Every institution, be it Grameen or any other organisation, may have some lapses but that doesn't mean the entire organisation is bad and need to be dismantled! I strongly feel that instead of splitting Grameen Bank into small pieces, it should be allowed to operate in its original structure through rectifying the lapses and gaps in the system.

Professor M Zahidul Haque  
Dean, Faculty of Agriculture  
SAU, Dhaka

## Address migrant workers' needs



Our country's main income source is foreign remittance. So the welfare of our migrant workers should be a major concern for us. We are now passing through a critical time in KSA, as a large number of our people are working illegally here. It's time we did something to help the non-resident Bangladeshi workers all over the world. Our embassy should have all the migrant workers' information in details (workplace, work nature, employers' details, etc.). They must have sufficient manpower to reach any immigrant in case of emergency and should also provide all legal supports to the workers.

Mohammad Nazmul Hassan  
Lead Engineer  
XERVON Saudi Arabia

## NU students sans Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi is one of the most popular wireless networking technologies that allows an electronic device to exchange data using radio waves over a computer network. It is perhaps the speediest way of using data. In the developing countries like Bangladesh, Wi-Fi is a blessing to the people who don't afford to buy costly internet packages. Public and private universities provide Wi-Fi facility to their students. Unfortunately, we, the National University students are deprived of this facility. I would like to draw the attention of the authorities concerned in this respect.

Md. Abir Hossain  
Department of English  
Government Titumir College

## Enough is enough

The other day, I saw the Bangladesh foreign minister Dipu Moni speaking to the pressmen on TV about the fate of Tarique Rahman, that he gave a bond that he would not take part in any political activities in Bangladesh and there is no bar to arresting him with the help of the Scotland Yard and extradite him to Bangladesh from London for his alleged involvement in criminal activities.

The parties both in and outside power have been looting and plundering the nation for more than four decades. This should come to a stop now. Enough is enough. Let people enjoy the fruits of freedom earned at the cost of millions of lives.

Saleh Mohammad Ayub  
Houston, Texas, USA

## Comments on news report, “Fight for tender proves fatal” published on June 26, 2013

SM

Look at the one smiling...who knows he could be the next MP from AL.

Shahin Huq

Is there any limit to Chhatra League's brutality? These thugs' engagement in the tender matters is already a crime. On top of that, they have killed two human beings! How can Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina justify such acts? Is she going to tell us that they do not belong to her party?

not-a-good-look

Why try to hide your face now? What you hoodlums were thinking when you used gun for grabbing tender, which ended two lives? Were you thinking that you were above the law?

truthprevails53

Scums like them should be shot at sight.

Anonymous

It seems those BCL thugs have got license to kill people.

Abir

Chhatra League doesn't care as long as AL is in power.