

Neighbours and our initiatives

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WE know that no nation, big or small, can afford to neglect the development on its border or ignore the attitude of its neighbours towards it. Historical experience reveals that friendship and harmony between neighbours exist so long as the national interests do not collide. Although military option is not the alternative, no nation can afford to overlook the necessity of deterrence to dissuade neighbours from threatening its stability.

Bangladesh is one of the very few countries in the world which is unilingual, ethnically harmonious and religiously moderate that enjoys peace and stability despite political differences. Ever since Bangladesh emerged as an independent country, it has remained focused on maintaining peace with its neighbours. We neither savour any contempt nor do we have any malice towards them. Our priorities have been economic development and consolidation of political institutions to give fillip to our democracy.

We have stepped into the fourth decade of multiparty democracy despite a few rounds of violent disruptions. We must confess that now is the time that we should assert ourselves to address the challenges to our territorial integrity, social cohesiveness and ethnic harmony. We must identify our vulnerabilities so that we can map our political, diplomatic and military strategy accordingly. Therefore, it is imperative

to take into account the issues of discord with our neighbours that can snowball into confrontation with them.

Bangladesh, for a large part of its history, has been disposed to take low key stance on issues involving its neighbours, for valid reasons. Exchange of enclaves remains a vexing issue. Proportional sharing of water of the transnational rivers with India, as a lower riparian country, remains elusive.

Dam over Tipai Mukh is another issue that warrants immediate settlement lest we should be pushed to face horrendous water scarcity in the dry seasons that will threaten the desertification of Sylhet and cause salinity in the Meghna delta, and which will also cause immense navigational and agricultural nightmare. Although India has been assuring us time and again that the project is unlikely to affect our environment, India's lukewarm response to our offer of joint survey in this instance has raised suspicion about its assurance in this regard.

Advocate Panna Lal Dhar, who worked closely with the South Block, seat of India's Foreign Ministry, wrote in his book 'India, Her Neighbours and Foreign policy' that India now needs a foreign policy that is linked to the recovery of her lost territory and de-linked from the fanciful purpose of peaceful co-existence. On the issue of Bangladesh becoming independent, Mr. Dhar expressed happiness and wrote, "India for the first time became adept in the adult game of real politics

when she took bold step to partition Bangladesh out of Pakistan as a tit-for-tat for India's partition of 1947."

Mr. Dhar did not like that Bangladesh was asserting itself as an independent state while Sri Lanka and Maldives, whom India assisted to defend their territorial sovereignty, were made obliged to share India's foreign policy concerns. He lamented that, "unfortunately this line has not been followed up in her relations with Bangladesh which soon forgot that its independence was due to India and it was wrong on India's part to believe that it would not"

It is essential for any nation to remain ever alert about the sensitivities of the neighbours, big or small. Bangladesh should pursue friendship with all its neighbors, especially with those having territorial contiguity with it and take measure congruous to the seriousness of the situation. Diplomatic clichés apart, we should cultivate friendship on a level playing field and accept any offer of support for mutual benefit. In our instance, we will be happy if multilateral initiatives are adopted as most of our problems involve India, Myanmar and Nepal, be it water sharing or border demarcation.

It is easier to work with a neighbour whose sincerity you know about than the one who fails to appreciate our geopolitical imperatives. The best way in my understanding, is to enliven the spirit of SAARC because bilateralism has not succeeded in

solving the problems in South Asia. We should not forget that no one neighbour can win by making another loose. Therefore, we would expect the big neighbour to play the major role to get all the others to agree to promote multilateralism, which is the guiding spirit of SAARC.

This can only happen if the big neighbours accommodate the hopes and aspirations of smaller ones, if need be by giving concessions. And if that is appreciated, then our honorable Foreign Minister will not have to come back empty handed in future as it happened during her recent visit to India. One hopes India would honour our Prime Minister when she visits India in a couple of months and thus spare her further embarrassment.

Dr. Manmohan Singh had requested cooperation of all parties to solve India's outstanding issues with Bangladesh, especially the land boundary. The BJP has refused to cooperate and so has Mamata Banerjee's Trinomul. Does it not mean that the stumbling block stands fast, signaling that our efforts to pursue friendship with India will be hampered?

Will this auger well for India who is seeking a global role? Will it not significantly contribute to cementing the suspicion that Bangladeshis have about India's sincerity in addressing Bangladesh's bilateral issues?

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Singing in the same tune

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THE building (Rana Plaza) collapse was beyond the owner's control. It was an act of God.' Apparently a very God-loving person said this. We cannot understand why God preferred the poor garment workers, most of whom were women, to the owner of the building as victims of His act.

There was widespread condemnation of Hefajat-e Islam's chief Shah Ahmed Shafi when the media revealed that he found no difference between the taste of tamarind and the sight of women. Mr. Shafi urged men to keep their women indoors and away from work because otherwise men would salivate at their sight. In Bangladesh there are people who have found women as the cause of many social ills and some disasters in the country. When a disaster befalls us, some people point their fingers towards Allah who, according to them, punishes the particular people because of their deviation from His path, irresistibly pulled away by women unwilling to stay indoors.

It is not only the clerics who find the causes of any disaster in God's anger because men have fallen into the trap of lust laid by women; there are others too. Sometimes there is no woman connection; it is just God's will. Some of our ministers in the past had also blamed God for any misfortune. We can feel proud of so many God-loving people in the country who see the hand of God in our traffic accidents, boat capsizes, floods, etc. I cannot imagine how God Himself feels about these people who never correct themselves but shift their



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responsibilities on God's shoulders by finding excuses of His involvement in an accident. Does even a leaf of a tree move without the will of God?

Who made this discovery? It was neither Mr. Shafi of Hefajat-e Islam nor any rural cleric. It is Mr. Atiqul Islam, President of BGMEA. Birds of a feather may not always flock together but chirp in the same way. It is the way both these persons blame Nature for any catastrophe.

What is fate then? Does it really exist? Many will answer, yes, some, no. In fact it exists more truly and in a stronger way than you and I. It is the sociopolitical system that is not fair to all. When a particular social system gives some people more than their due by depriving many of their fellow beings, the have-nots blame fate and make the have-nots believe in it. The greater the division between the haves and the have-nots, the stronger is the motivation to blame fate.

The Daily Star editorial (August 6, 2013) condemned BGMEA 'for this cruel joke'. The Editorial correctly pointed to the 'dubious motives also behind such comments': 'It is to save the killers as well as to deprive the families of the victims and the survivors their rightful due. And in fact this paper reported ... that by showing that the collapse was a natural disaster the BGMEA has indeed cheated the victims.'

Now, dear readers, the judgment is up to you whether those two are of the same feather and, if not, which of them is better and which is worse.

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Haor education: Should distance be the barrier?

MOHAMMED NORUL ALAM RAJU

ALTHOUGH the government of Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in enrolling and completion rate of children in primary education the rate of school dropout is still high in the country's Haor region. A study reveals that about 86 percent of children enroll in primary education every year while 11 percent of them drop out of school due to various reasons including poverty, lack of parental awareness, impact of flood, insufficient numbers of schools in marginalized areas, communication difficulties, etc. (PPRC, 2012). Although our national policies have pledged special attention to the disadvantaged community including Haor people they are yet to enjoy the full access to the essential services by the government including education.

Haor is a wetland ecosystem or a very low lying river basin area covered by water almost six months in a year starting from the monsoon. In the Haor area, there are estimated to be 165 Unions with a total population of 3.8 million. Extreme poor communication is the major reason for economic deprivation and social inequalities. Due to geographical isolation, many children remain away from school. On the other hand, the number of educational institutions is much lower than other regions of the country, with only 7.8% of the primary level institutions and 3.9% of the secondary level institutions clearly showing the shortage of educational institutions. Due to inadequate number of schools, in most cases children have to attend school outside of their settlement. Like other parts of Bangladesh, the Haor areas suffer from the lower institutional investment in education, lack of education supplies including lack of electricity, drinking water and sanitation facility crisis, inadequate infrastructure, cleanliness of walls and floors and quality education materials.

Number of girls' school is lower than the boys or general school in Haor areas. As a result, girl's enrolment rate shows lower and drop-out rate is high. Lack of transportation and communication hinder access to schools, particularly prohibits girl education significantly. In many villages, there are no primary or high schools (For example: only 75 Primary Schools and 10 Secondary Schools in 180 villages in Bishwamvarpur Upazilla) although National Education Policy 2010 commits to ensure schools in every village. In addition, lack of qualified teachers, pupil-teacher ratio, lack of female teachers are the obstacles for ensuring quality education, while lack of

recreational facilities in the schools makes students find these an uninteresting place.

In Haor areas, shortage of teachers in both primary and secondary levels is also lower than the average number of teachers of the country. The average number of teachers in the primary and secondary schools in this region is 4.4 and 12.8 against the national figures of 5.1 and 14.3 respectively. Due to communication vulnerabilities, major numbers of teachers live in urban areas instead of living adjacent to the schools.



Thus, absenteeism and late arrival in and early departure from school are significantly higher in the Haor areas that ultimately affects the contact hour of the learners.

Due to communication barrier, Upazilla Education Officials are not willing to visit schools on a regular basis and are less proactive in addressing the key issues of school operation in terms of ensuring access and quality. Some schools are not visited at all throughout a year by the local education administration. It was found in the study (Education Watch) that 72.5% of the primary schools did not see any visitor in a particular year.

Considering all these, children are among the most vulnerable population groups during rainy season, especially those attending schools. During monsoon, school buildings

are destroyed, taking away the precious lives of children and teachers and stalling education in the aftermath of heavy monsoon. If any medium scale disaster occurs, around 30% of schools become shelter center that affect their academic calendar. In addition, economic condition of many families in post-monsoon situation does not allow many students to attend school. A significant number of students are displaced and migrate with their families to long distances due to loss of their

dwelling and homestead. Many families cannot afford the expenses for boat or any other extra transportation to send children to schools due to inundation, destruction of bridges, roads, and culverts. These are nothing but cost barriers for the children from poor families and families without work. Another added access-barrier is experienced by the children with disability as their special needs are addressed indifferently.

Despite a number of challenges the government planned to take significant initiatives to ensure primary education though still it is lying at the policy level. Though nature causes immense crisis in transportation and communication but in this "digital" era, distance/poor communication/unavailability of transportation should not be an excuse in terms of ensuring education for all.

Crossword puzzle grid with clues for Across and Down sections.

Cryptoquip puzzle grid with the clue: Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THE MASTERLY COMEDIAN ONLY IMPERSONATES ACTORS AND POLITICIANS. IT'S HIS IMITATION LIMITATION. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Z equals Y

BEETLE BAILY cartoon strip showing Beetle Baily cleaning a toilet and talking to a man.

HENRY cartoon strip showing Henry at school and talking to a man.

QUOTABLE Quotes section featuring a quote by Kofi Annan: "To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there."