

A new threat to migrant workers

MRPs must be ensured

POVERTY, fraudulent agents, difficult employers, inhuman working and living conditions, and now even a conflict in the air. As if the challenges were not enough for Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad, now they also face the risk of being out of work and deported if they do not possess machine-readable passports (MRP) by March 2015.

While passports are a necessity for every citizen, they are crucial for the thousands who migrate every month and the over 6 million Bangladeshis currently working abroad. Without MRPs, the latter will not be able to obtain or renew their visas or work permits, not to mention restrictions on travel home, after the given date. In countries such as Malaysia, where the government has already begun a crackdown on illegal foreign nationals and where there are a large number of Bangladeshi workers, their plight will be even more severe.

Remittance accounts for around \$14 billion, 11% of our gross domestic product (GDP). Overseas employment also makes up 25% of overall employment. It is essential that we remove all obstacles to the growth of a sector which is so crucial to our nation's economic development. The task of issuing passports to the citizens of a country as overpopulated as ours may be daunting, but it must be done and the authorities must take all necessary steps to make the process quicker and the system more efficient.

Pavements under siege

Motorcyclists' menacing ride

A news photo in our yesterday's paper vividly demonstrated how motorbikes riding along footpaths by Ramna Park posed hazard and inconvenience to pedestrians. This is just a snapshot view of what is emerging as a terrible phenomenon on the pavements across the city.

The bikers swarm like locust on the footpaths. They just scamper on to these in a close shave with a vehicle slowing down to take a turn on the main road, even sometimes opening the door to drop off one or the other passenger risking an accident. This particular exploit of the motorcyclists, themselves sometimes carrying more than one passenger to risk a fall in gleeful nonchalance towards pedestrians is utterly outrageous. This puts at risk both the mavericks as well as their victims.

It represents an outlandish violation of rudimentary traffic rules. What a terrible addition is this to the tangled mess on the pavements with construction materials, jutting garbage, sales wares, squatting hawkers, welding outfits and teashop fronts draped overhead with flimsy plastic material.

On the motorcyclists ramping up on the pavements making shortcuts to avoid traffic congestion, the High Court had ruled a prohibition against it. But the menace continues with vengeance as the police are yet to enforce the court directive. The impunity has grown because no violator has been fined or otherwise penalised. This must begin now to din a sense into the ears of the unruly motorcyclists.

The Statesman

MR. Cameron loses

EDITORIAL

A new chapter in British constitutional history was scripted on Friday with Prime Minister David Cameron's defeat in the House of Commons on a matter of foreign policy. The parliamentary vote has rejected the idea of Britain joining the concert of invaders -- notably America and France -- to teach Syria a lesson in the aftermath of the alleged chemical attack. It is rare for the government to be defeated on foreign policy; for Mr. Cameron, who had pitched for Western invasion ever since the visuals were aired on YouTube, the vote has been a political catastrophe.

It was 200 years ago that a prime ministerial war motion was defeated, pre-eminently Lord North over the American War of Independence. Such ironies of war and peace shape history as do judicious initiatives by leaders. Not that the landmark repetition of military history will affect the warlike designs of Barack Obama or Francois Hollande; unlike in Iraq, Britain shall not be part of the attacking forces, however.

Iraq was a war that the average Brit didn't approve of, yet Tony Blair had bashed on regardless in the company of George Bush. Friday's robust disapproval of the legislature signifies that enough is enough. The Commons has spelt out the difference between 2003 and 2013; in the span of a decade it has influenced international power-games by setting Britain's terms of engagement. Across the Atlantic, President Obama's inaugural rhetoric to end the "decade of wars" has been fulfilled by the British legislature though he himself, increasingly egged on by Secretary of State John Kerry, displays an impatient desire to strike.

Britain's legislative rejection must rank as a classic case-study of how parliamentary democracy ought to work... free from rumbustious scenes and logjam as in this part of the world. Did Mr. Cameron misjudge the mood of the people? Neither he nor his ministers could convince the nation with their claim that there could be no analogy between the planned limited strikes on Syria and the invasion of Iraq. Arguably, the price of misjudgment would have been still more disastrous than the legislative setback.

The prime minister has been humbled as has his Lib-Dem deputy, Nick Clegg, who too had shrilled for war. Britain's international stature is now diminished, while its democratic credentials are reinforced. The resounding note of the Commons vote resonates across the Atlantic.

System delivery and national identity system



SYED MANSUR HASHIM

IN 2007, the Election Commission Bangladesh (EC) began preparation of a landmark project called 'Preparation of electoral roll with photographs.' The government started issuing national identity cards (NID) when the electoral roll was completed. This was a very credible database, i.e. data captured was done with a high degree of accuracy. Each card included the name, father's / husband's name, date of birth, address, and voter's area in the voter list. Those were the findings of an independent UNDP audit of the programme in 2008.

Following this, the EC designed an intervention named "Identification system for Enhancing Access to Services (IDEA)" in 2011. The newly formed National Identity Registry Wing (NIDW) under EC is responsible for implementing the whole NID system. The financing worth \$195million has been mobilised through a multilateral agency. IDEA aims at introducing ID verification system for service delivery. National Board of Revenue (NBR) was the first agency to access the ID verification system as it launched the e-TIN on July, 2013. This is the first of this kind of verification system between two public sector agencies.

Using the system, a citizen requires using his / her NID number to convert his / her TIN to e-TIN or obtain a new e-TIN. The whole process is completed in a matter of minutes and can be done by logging on to the NBR website. According to a report published in *The Daily Star* on July 2, NBR, there are 3.3million citizens having TINs. Ironically, when NBR prepared the e-TIN system, it cleaned up the database and found that 1.7million were *fake* TINs. These fake TINs were used to avail different services / privileges by dishonest people.

IDEA has also signed an MOU with Bangladesh Bank. Similar verification service will soon likely to be introduced for the Bureau of Statistics' Poverty Registry database and Machine Readable Passport. Such systems have been used successfully in the region. India's system, known as *Aadhaar* (meaning "foundation" in several Indian languages) is a unique digital identification programme that aims to provide the nation's 1.2 billion residents with a digital proof of identity. Using a digital proof of identity, the system "matches with 99.99% accuracy millions of names every night against the already-registered 300 million identities to ensure there are no duplicates."

The NID numbers are not being verified. As there is no means to verify, there is effectively no way to stop either graft or any means to ascertain that goods or services destined for target segments of society are actually reaching the intended recipients.

In Pakistan, National Database and Registry Authority has introduced IT based smart National ID card. This smart card has multi-dimensional usage and services; it includes social and financial programmes like easy pension disbursement. Nepal has also started its NID system. The advantages associated with digital ID verification system are obvious. It will help reduce costs in service delivery and make services more accessible to poor people. For the government, it will aid in disciplining the financial sector as is already evident with NBR. Equally important is its impact on promoting good governance, in terms of improving efficiency, increasing citizen's satisfaction and reducing corruption.

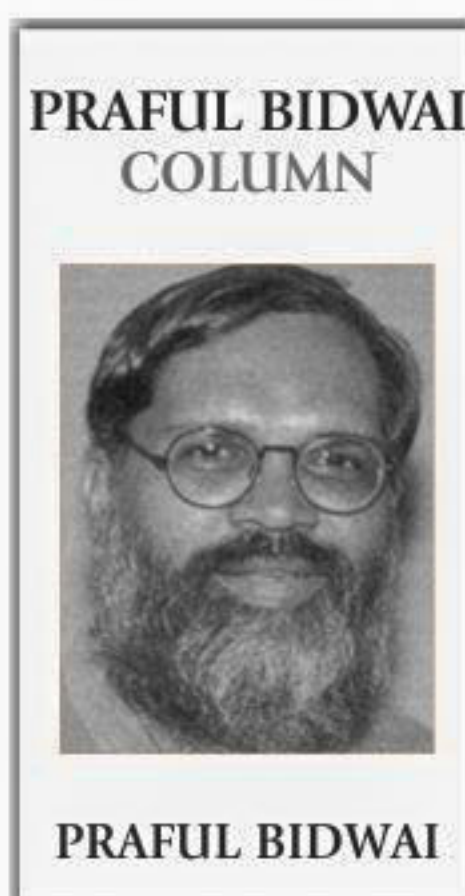
Yet, there have been problems in the implementation of the NID scheme in Bangladesh. Presently, only people over 18 years of age will get NID number. This bar effectively excludes the system to be used effectively for system delivery on programmes (e.g. health-related programmes designed for minors). There is also no linkage with Birth and Death Registry system run by local government ministry. Furthermore, the existing National Identity Registry Act (NIRA 2010) could not be fully operationalised since 'Rules and Regulations' are yet to be finalised.

The end result of these "gaps" is multifarious. Agencies from both private and public sectors are asking people to show their ID cards for accessing services. Yet, the NID numbers are *not being verified*. As there is no means to verify, there is effectively no way to stop either graft or any means to ascertain that goods or services destined for target segments of society are actually reaching the intended recipients. Given this "hole" in the system, it is only natural that fake NID cards are popping up on the radar.

Yesterday, the cabinet cleared some crucial amendments to the NID Act. It is expected that the September 2013 session of parliament will pass the Bill. Of the many key features of the amendment, some need to be highlighted. It proposes to include data privacy and protection clauses for NID verification and data sharing between EC and other agencies. Bringing the crucial change, in that, *no citizen* will be excluded from services until all have a NID card. A smart card is only 'smart' when the NID number of each citizen is a unique NID number (will eliminate current trend of duplication). Of all the changes highlighted here, it is imperative that the scope of NID verification system be expanded to include more service delivery agencies without further delay.

The writer is Assistant Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Reason must triumph over blind faith



PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

PRAFUL BIDWAI

THE assassination of anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar in Pune is a black mark on Indian society. Forces of intolerance, superstition, irrationality and reaction killed him not because he threatened their faith or freedom, but because he was against exploiting people through black magic, sorcery, and sleights-of-hand while invoking supernatural powers.

Personal rivalry cannot explain Dabholkar's killing. Those knew him -- including this writer, who has written for his remarkable weekly "*Sadhana*" -- would testify he was too amiable and disarming to inspire personal animosity.

Dabholkar's anti-superstition convictions were anathema to obscurantists and religious bigots. A society in which rationalist intellectuals are killed, but violent rituals to exorcise "evil spirits" are condoned, isn't minimally civilised.

In India, 2,500 women were killed in witchcraft rituals over the last 15 years, according to anti-superstition activists.

It's probable that caste *panchayats* or Hindutva groups like Sanatan Sanstha and Hindu Janajagriti Samiti plotted Dabholkar's killing. Sanatan Sanstha's Jayant Athavale wrote a sinister obituary. "Instead of dying bedridden through illness, or... following a surgery," Dabholkar died instantly; it was, "a blessing..." This rationalises the murder.

Three days later, activists of the Akhil Bhartiya Vyadharti Parishad (the Bharatiya Janata Party's student wing) broke up a memorial meeting for Dabholkar, and assaulted members of the music-band Kabir Kala Manch. They branded the organisers "Naxalites" because one of them refused to chant "Jai Narendra Modi" when so ordered.

Another pointer is the last threat to Dabholkar: "Remember Gandhi. Remember what we did to him." This lays claim to Nathuram Godse's hideous legacy. Even the mild-mannered Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan saw "the same mindset" at work.

Dabholkar's killing is the latest in serial explosions of intolerance in Pune, including ransacking of the prestigious Bhadarkar Oriental Research Institute in 2004, killing of five social activists in 2010, and cancellation of a screening of Sanjay Kak's film on Kashmir in 2012.

The killing highlights Maharashtra's tragic cultural retrogression. Maharashtra was the crucible of India's social reform movement for a century, led by Shahu Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Agarkar, Karve, Ramabai Ranade, and B.R. Ambedkar.

Social reform took early mass roots in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Dalit and Other Backward Classes mobilisation came later in North India. It owes much to this early movement.

Maharashtra saw the flowering of India's first Bahujan Samaj mobilisation against religious orthodoxy, casteism, sati, gender discrimination, and barring of temple entry to Dalits. It championed girls'/women's education and widow remarriage. It firmly embraced the Enlightenment values of reason and critical inquiry.

The reformists faced venomous opposition, including social boycott, from traditional upper-caste status quoists. But they heroically resisted.

The balance changed with the rise of the chauvinist-communal Shiv Sena, which reversed the gains of social reform. With this, says social critic Shanta Gokhale, the needle that had oscillated "between Maharashtra's progressive and

regressive heritage stopped on the side of regression."

Although a rationalist, Dabholkar didn't campaign against faith per se, only against blind faith and exploitation of gullible people through witchcraft, tricks passed off as "miracles," amulets, gemstones, and beatings and torture to drive out the "evil spirits" to which people's health or financial problems are falsely attributed.

He trenchantly opposed practices such as preventing vaccination and medical treatment for illnesses, and substituting mantras instead; animal and human sacrifice to ward off ill-luck; falsely branding people as Satanic; or falsely claiming to perform miracles.

Dabholkar lobbied for the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Bill, delayed for 18 years by the Hindu Right's opposition.

This seeks to prosecute people for claiming supernatural powers or the reincarnation of saints/gods, and ill-treating the psychologically distressed in the belief that they are smitten by evil spirits.

It covers rituals performed to beget a male child, and claims to omniscience by virtue of being "possessed" by supernatural powers. After Dabholkar's killing, the Maharashtra government brought an ordinance to implement the Bill.

This only completes one part of Dabholkar's unfinished agenda. The rest lies in extending such laws to the whole of India, and vigorously promoting the scientific temper and a spirit of critical inquiry -- not just in classrooms, not only to earn degrees or jobs, but in daily life -- while making crucial decisions about individual freedom, marriage, the family and religion.

This agenda has acquired great relevance and urgency in today's South Asia. Liberalisation and globalisation have

disrupted old social balances and faith systems and given rise to a politicised religiosity in our region.

A "pop Hinduism" thrives in India, centred on temples, pilgrimages, god-men and -- women, with new, more ostentatious rituals -- amidst an explosive growth of superstition among the middle class.

In the 1960s, being superstitious was considered incorrect and infra dig among educated Indians.

Now, it's fashionable to rely on astrological predictions, wear flashy gemstones, get advice from outright quacks, and deify self-proclaimed holy men like Asaram Bapu.

Weird practices like Wiccanism (Western witchcraft), regression therapy (when you delude yourself to be the reincarnation of a mythological figure like Kalkeeyee), and performance of elaborate *havans* and *yagnas* to bring fortune have pervaded middle class life. Observances like *kathas*, *jagrans* and *bhajans* are getting more public and raucous.

As Meera Nanda argues in *The God Market*, this religiosity is cultivated by "the emerging state-temple-corporate complex," which is corrupting secular public institutions and embedding Hindu rituals and symbols in the affairs of the state. Hindu religiosity is also getting fused with national pride and the idea that India's recent (and alas, fast-eroding) economic success is rooted in the superiority of its ancient (read, Hindu) civilisation.

This religiosity is supported by the state, temple-related bodies, and business groups. It's easily harnessed to political causes and to greater intolerance towards the religious minorities.

This is nowhere more evident than in Ayodhya, where a new kind of *parikrama* was invented to sow communal hatred. Opposing such pernicious practices and defending rationality would be the right homage to Dabholkar.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Roads in bad state of disrepair

On a brief re-visit to Bangladesh, I have been very shocked at the state of the roads. Little roads are bone-rattling enough but arterial ones are frightening!

In 1999, when I first went up to Haluaghat, where I lived and worked for 2 1/2 years, we reached Mymensingh in 3 hours and in the following years I travelled that road many times. This week, however, it took 5 hours of torture for the little car! Of course, the road from there to Haluaghat is one of the best and most beautiful in the country but I hear it was built by the South Koreans. So why cannot Bangladeshis build decent roads when there is no shortage of brilliant engineers and honourable workmen? How is it that, apparently, incompetents with the right political contacts get the job and the few who do try to do the job properly are constantly harassed by those wanting 'economies' and 'short cuts'? I saw expensive road-building machinery and materials, lying unused at the side of the road and little evidence of activity. I believe the same applies to the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. On smaller roads, men have been seen putting stuff into holes in the road that is swept away in the next rainstorm!

We are doubtless impressed by the brand-new flyovers but I guess they are a different sort of project than a 'mere' repair job -- though it will be interesting to see what happens when they need repair -- and how soon...

Is it surprising that no investors come forward to provide the funds for a nation to build a BRIDGE when the evidence is that it cannot master the art of mending holes in the road?

Angela Robinson
Baridhara, Dhaka

A praiseworthy decision

British Defense Secretary Philip Hammond confirmed that Britain would not be involved in any action against Syria, following a 285-272 vote against a motion by British PM David Cameron to authorise a military response.

We have learnt from media reports that US officials conceded that they lacked conclusive evidence that Assad personally ordered last week's poison gas attack. Some allies have warned that military action without UN Security Council authorisation will worsen the situation.

Russia is sending two warships to the eastern Mediterranean. China said there should be no rush to force council action against Syria until the probe by UN inspectors is complete.

We simply understand that civil casualties can not be avoided in any military actions. We still believe in political solution to save the ordinary citizens of Syria. We hope no super power will attack Syria bypassing the United Nations.

Mobarak Ali
Gopibagh, Dhaka

Comments on news report, "Defence purchase govt's priority," published on August 31, 2013

The Observer

The reason of big defence budget is, I assume, big commission for the decision makers and the military leaders. Is there anybody to ask explanation for this madness?

agent_47

I think the reason for the big purchase is to keep army on their side.

Sheikh Monirul Islam, Opec

It is all about corruption. In normal business, it hangs around 10 to 16%; but in these purchase it can go as high as 50% as the deals are kept secret and what is negotiated with the other side is often manipulated and twisted.

Shahin Huq

While the country is suffering from so many problems, what is the use of these weapons? Isn't it squandering public money to please foreign masters? Or, are these weapons to kill the people? Then these are not needed.

Mahboob Hossain

It pains me when I see the hard earned money of the poor farmers, workers in the Middle East and garment workers is being wasted in such a way.

"Questions aplenty" (September 1, 2013)

Abbasuddin

War criminals in Bangladesh put on Islamic dresses to camouflage themselves to bluff the illiterate citizens of the country. Similarly, Adilur being a BNP activist camouflaged himself as human rights worker and fooled the US government, UN, etc.

Shafiq Ahmad

Congratulations to The Daily Star for bringing out some facts. It is unfortunate that organisations like Odhikar are being used for political purposes.

truthprevails53

Adilur should be thoroughly questioned and we need to know who has been financing or influencing him to come up with deaths that never occurred.