

LGRD bodies' 10 percent Cant' we put a stop to it?

THE TIB report portrays a very dark picture of the local government bodies. But it only reconfirms what is already public knowledge. The said report shows that bribery, which is employed to grease the palms of various officials, nepotism and political influence, determine the approval of local government projects. This picture is fairly representative of the state of affairs in almost all the government ministries and departments. What is perhaps news is the percentage of the project funds, 10 percent of the outlay, that line the pockets of the various ministry officials for their munificence.

It is a shameful narrative of the way corruption has been institutionalized. And for institutions that have to do with the alleviation of poverty, rural development and provision of social safety net, the deleterious consequences of such rampant corruption need hardly be emphasised.

It would not be remiss to suggest that local government institutions have been used in very partisan manner to give monetary benefits to party members at grassroots level. Local party members and the local MPs control the approval of projects and the use of funds of the local bodies. And much of the responsibility for poor state of local government bodies have to do with the way that these bodies have been made dysfunctional by keeping them under the thumb of the government and the local MPs.

We would hope the LGRD minister would be motivated enough by this report to do something to bring a semblance of probity in the way funds are used by his ministry which, by the way, has got around seven percent of the national budget.

Facebook used for leaking question Socializing cheating!

A face book page named 'HSC exam 2014' was found to have disclosed at least 18 of 22 questions of HSC's maths first part exam that was held on Sunday. Audaciously, the profile picture of the page had the title "Prashnopotro Fash" (question paper leaked). Responding to the incident, the board authority is reported to have refuted the claims, but then the question is how they could have ignored an obvious reality!

Since the very beginning of HSC exams, we have witnessed sequential occurrences of question papers being leaked which included English second paper and two papers of both physics and chemistry. Routinely, after every leakage incident a probe committee would be formed and a report submitted but then the board authority repeatedly failed to deter the menace. The leaks could not have occurred without a helping hand from the insiders.

It is no longer a question of 'how' the leaks are happening but 'who' are making them happen. Once the offenders are taken into custody the techniques for leaking will come out. Having said this, the board authority must also ensure that the remaining Higher Secondary Certificate exams and other public exams, for that matter, are conducted without any dubious incidents making a sham of public examinations.

Finally, the leaks put a question mark on the credibility

Has honesty eroded totally?

ABDUL MATIN

DURING the early 1960s, "Drinka pinta milka day" was a popular advertisement in England. Milk was then a favourite drink also. The milkman used to deliver the fresh bottles outside the front door and collect the empty bottles from there every morning. At the end of the week, he collected the money left at night with the empty bottles. It was a common practice in London at that time. Theft of money left outside for the milkman was never heard of. It was not necessary for a milkman to ring the doorbell either for delivery the bottles or for collection of money.

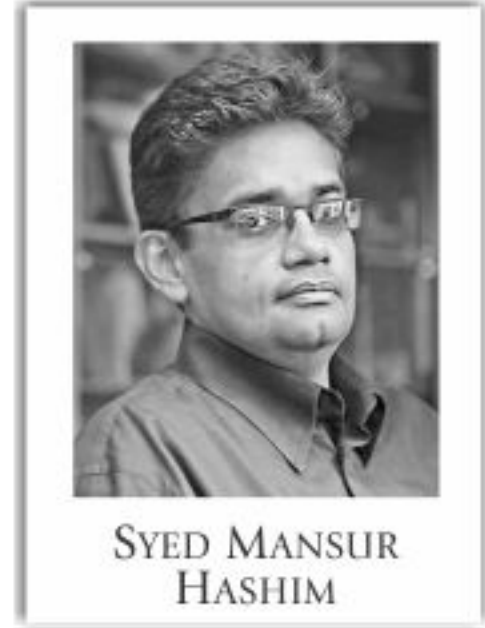
During a visit to London in the mid 1970s, I was surprised to hear the doorbell ringing in the early morning. I was told my hostess that it was the milkman calling. "Why should a milkman ring the doorbell?" I asked her. "He has come to deliver the milk and collect the money." She replied. "Don't you leave the money with the empty bottles?" I asked her again. "Those golden days are gone." She said and added: "There are some youngsters in the locality who not only steal the money but also drink the milk, if left outside the door. So, the milkman rings the bell so that we collect the milk soon after delivery!" The British were so proud of their honesty at one time. I felt so sorry to see how honesty had eroded, at least among a certain group of people, in England.

Very recently, I was surprised to see a different picture in Dhaka. Street side tea shops have become common in the city. While walking in the morning, I have seen several vendors delivering their merchandise to these shops often before the arrival of the shop owners. They leave cakes, biscuits, buns, bananas and other food items at the unattended shops, usually covered by a sack or a plastic sheet. At that time, the roads are normally frequented by garment workers, office goers, domestic helps, drivers, day labourers etc. Out of curiosity, I once I asked a vendor: "Aren't the items stolen sometimes?" He replied politely: "Not to my knowledge, Sir."

I was pleasantly surprised and felt so proud like the British did in the early days. It shows honesty has not totally eroded from our country. Some people are still honest. They are poor. They soil their hands to earn their livelihood. They don't steal other's properties. They are so different from those who have become rich overnight by defaulting bank loans, extorting money and grabbing others' properties and now live like parasites on the society.

The writer is a former chief engineer of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.

Energy alliance between Russia and China



SYED MANSUR
HASHIM

A decade of negotiations resulted in a new accord between China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Russia's Gazprom during President Putin's visit to Beijing in May 2014. It paves the way for development of the mammoth Chayanda natural gas field located in Russia's eastern flank which, when completed in 2018, will carry an estimated 38 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas to China. This marks a significant shift in Russia's energy export policy which until now had been geared towards supplying Europe with natural gas. The agreement is very important for Russia as it binds China to purchase a minimum of \$400 billion worth of gas over a period of 30 years.

This deal is more than simply cents and dollars for one of Russia's principal exports. As pointed out by a report in Foreign Policy Research Institute: "Having long underinvested in exploration to replace aging and depleting fields, Russia's energy companies needed money to develop new oil and natural gas reserves in the Russian Far East." The deal could not have come at a better time. With the Ukrainian crisis now in full swing and talk of tougher economic backlash in the works from the West and a general rethinking by Europe on its reliance on Russian gas, the first major step on moving the supply chain of natural gas from Europe to Asia has been taken.

Market diversification, i.e. a move away from overreliance on the European market has been a headache for Russian policymakers for some time now. The deal inked in May is the first of many steps we are likely to see that will eventually carry Russian gas to other markets in Asia. And it is not only gas that is being talked about here. With the Daqing pipeline becoming operational in 2012, Russian oil that had previously been transported to China on rail links is now being transported much more efficiently and safely. Cracking the Chinese market was imperative for Russia as it is not only large global energy player. Both Australia and the United States are emerging as serious contenders in the international energy market. Multinational oil companies are set to reap the benefits from a string of natural gas exploration projects off the Australian coast. Media reports estimate that "over 80bcm of natural gas capacity is slated to come online" from Australian drilling, which will be converted into liquefied natural gas (LNG). While the US has taken the lead in



"fracking" technology that will probably bring the same volumes of natural gas to the market.

China too has benefited from Russian overtures in the energy sector. For years now, China has been devouring natural energy sources from different continents and has invested billions of dollars in exploration activities and infrastructure investments abroad. The problem lies in using sea lanes to transport the precious cargo, routes that are beyond its control. The rise in tensions, particularly with the US and its allies over the South China Sea, is just one example. Looking beyond the obvious geopolitical implications, China has always been concerned with ensuring a secure line through which it can bring in energy supplies uninterrupted. Energy security for its economy has, in many ways, taken precedence over other considerations. There is reason for this. In the '90s, the country was no longer self-sufficient in energy supplies from domestic sources. Hence, the hunt for raw materials to fire up its factories stretched as far away as Latin America.

In many ways the 2008 global financial meltdown was a

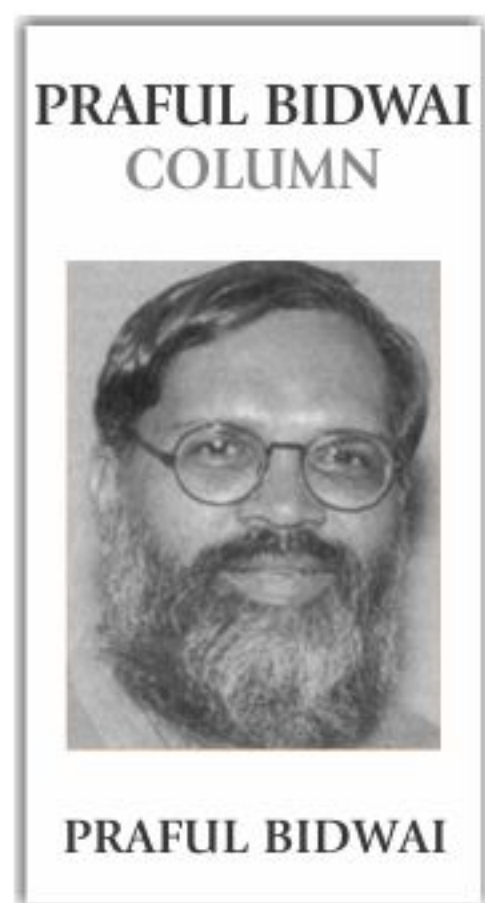
boon for China's energy sector. With the Western economies going into nosedive, Chinese companies bought stakes in many western oil and gas companies. As pointed out in an article in Caixin Online on January 27, 2014: "State-controlled China Petrochemical acquired a 40 percent interest in Repsol's Brazilian oil assets for \$7.1 billion in 2010, PetroChina (a unit of CNPC) agreed to buy a 20 percent stake of Royal Dutch Shell's Groundbirch natural gas development in Canada in 2011. That was followed by Sinopec's \$2.5 billion deal to acquire an interest in Devon Energy's shale-gas fields in the United States and PetroChina's \$1.6 billion buyout of BHP Billiton's holding in Woodside Petroleum."

It is interesting to observe the Russian bear and the Chinese panda at play here, given their animosity and cold relations as late as the 1960s. Though the world has moved on beyond the Cold War and neither country is Communist vying for control of the world Marxist order, old mistrusts die hard. It probably explains why Russia turned down a Chinese offer to build a pipeline from Siberia's oil and natural gas fields directly into China. The current arrangement is a workable model. China is too big a client for Russia to turn off the tap as it did with Ukraine in 2008, at least for the foreseeable future. It meets Chinese needs and provides a window for Russian energy to flow elsewhere into Asia in the future.

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Hindutva-capitalism takes power



PRAFUL BIDWAI
COLUMN

PRAFUL BIDWAI

INDIA'S election has produced the worst possible outcome: a majority for the BJP under a man widely believed to have been complicit in mass killings of Muslims, and not yet exonerated by the legal system despite its vulnerability to manipulation.

Make no mistake. Despite a limited (31%) vote, Narendra Modi's victory represents a Rightward social shift, and the triumph of Hindutva plus neoliberalism.

It's an ugly scar on the face of democracy, produced by long-festering pathologies, including communal prejudice, belligerent nationalism, social intolerance, paranoid propaganda, and elite craving for authoritarianism.

Contrary to claims, Modi's "presidentialism" campaign, in which billions of dollars and the corporate media played as crucial a part as "56-inch-chest" aggression, wasn't about "development"/"governance." It was India's most communalised campaign.

Modi personifies and radiates Hindutva. This time, his canvassing was actually lubricated by blood: in Muzaffarnagar (Uttar Pradesh), and later in Assam.

He wickedly deployed toxic rhetoric about expelling Bangladeshis "infiltrators" (read, Muslims) while welcoming "refugees" (read, Hindus), and brazenly used religious symbols. Six lakh Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh men ran the campaign with slogans like "love jihad" and "bahu bachao, beti bachao" (protect Hindu women from Muslims) to polarise opinion communally.

Polarisation helped the BJP exploit discontent with the Congress, rooted in high prices, corruption, and economic elitism (Big Business-oriented jobless growth). Also important was micro-level "booth management," in which 20-25 RSS men "cover" each polling station.

Thanks to polarisation, the BJP performed spectacularly in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra and Karnataka, won "saturation-level" seat-scores in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh, and secured its highest-ever vote in West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

The BJP's 71-of-80-seats UP victory is the highest there since 1984. Its 42.3% vote decimated its opponents in multi-cornered contests. The Bahujan Samaj Party couldn't win a seat despite a 19.6% vote.

The Samajwadi Party shrank from 23 to five seats despite winning 22.2 percent, only one percentage-point lower than in 2009. There was a weakening of its core Yadav-Muslim coalition because of Muzaffarnagar.

The BJP won over sections of low-caste groups and Dalits by communalising them and promising them jobs which they desperately crave. Another helpful factor was the partition of Muslim votes, attributable to the fear and loathing Modi provokes among Muslims.

Constituency-wise, Muslims rationally chose candidates best-placed to defeat Modi. Ironically, they thus scattered their votes between the SP and BSP, weaken-

ing both.

The Lok Sabha now has its lowest-ever Muslim representation: just 4%, way below the Muslims' 13.4% population share. For the first time, there isn't a Muslim MP from UP, where Muslims are one-fifth of the population. Also absent is the BSP -- India's third largest vote-catcher.

Such grave exclusion strengthens the case for replacing the British first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system India blindly follows, by widely prevalent (and fairer) Proportional Representation, which allots quotas to parties based on the votes polled, in addition to winning candidates.

The election has put a Hindutva fanatic in power, and established the ascendancy of Hindu-supremacism, for which the Sangh has fought since 1925 using repugnant methods, including assassination, communal riots, and invented threats to "the nation."

Today, the RSS can hide behind "democracy," as Hitler did in 1933. But this is democracy's degraded, communalised form, without equal rights for citizens, but charged with ethno-religious identity. India's Constitution defines citizenship universally, independently of such identities.

The Congress and the Left stand reduced to their lowest-ever seat-tallies. They cannot reverse their setbacks without drastic measures. The Aam Aadmi Party, which showed great promise, won only four seats. All its big leaders lost. It faces a grave crisis.

With the BJP achieving an absolute majority, we can expect four things. First, it will be pressed to revive the core-Hindutva agenda, including the Ram temple, Article 370, and a Uniform Civil Code. The temple is seemingly the least contentious. But if the BJP builds a raucous anti-Muslim agitation around it, it will generate serious strife.

Article 370 will be internationally controversial, and risk militarising the Kashmir crisis further. If a Uniform Civil Code is promoted, not as a universal gender-justice agenda, but imposed on Muslims, it could lead to bloodshed.

Second, the Parivar will soon begin its destructive "Long March" through India's already-weak democratic institutions. It will try to subvert the judiciary, and educational and cultural institutions. It will also manipulate the media. It understands the media's importance and its vulnerability to pressure from corporations, which increasingly drive its agendas.

Third, more militaristic approaches will be adopted against the Maoist movement in the Central-Eastern tribal belt. Under its ultra-neoliberal policies, the BJP will promote rampant extraction of natural resources, especially forests, minerals and rivers.

Handing these over to predatory corporations will provoke more popular resistance, which the government will repress ferociously. This will lead to untold human rights violations and brutalisation of some of India's poorest people.

Finally, there will be very little immediate resistance to the Hindutva-capitalist onslaught from the Parliamentary parties. That burden will fall on grassroots civil society movements which stand for a democratic-secular India. They must prepare for a long, hard War of Position.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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All RMG factories safe, really?

I saw the news item "Safety in garment factories not as bad as thought" published in Star Business on May 21. I think the survey methodology adopted by BIDS was far from satisfactory. They sent a two-page questionnaire to 6304 member factories of BGMEA and BKMEA. According to their own statement, despite repeated reminders from BGMEA and BKMEA, response to the census was low: only 499 out of 4400 BGMEA members and 257 of the 1904 BKMEA members responded.

It is clear that only those factories that were confident of their safety standards took part in the study and the factories that do not abide by the workplace safety standards, didn't respond. Overwhelming majority of the factories whose safety standards were poor was left out of the study. Random samples from the factories should have been included in the study to give validity to the findings.

It appears the government needed a good report from BIDS to show to the international retailers and they got it. We expect scientifically valid studies from BIDS.

Shahjahan Hafiz
Gulshan, Dhaka

Criminals are in the party

This refers to the article titled "What next after Feni and Narayanganj?" by Shakhawat Liton on 23rd May 2014. I agree with him and I would like to thank him for the piece. Now the public's main question: when will the ruling party stop blaming BNP and be brave enough to punish the culprits of their own party? It has been proved several times that criminals are not "evil forces against the spirit of independence and Liberation War," but local AL leaders, who are involved in unlawful activities. It's an earnest request to our lawmakers- please stop this charade! Put an end to the abductions and killings and restore peace and security in our beloved country.

Sabrina Samreen
Uttara, Dhaka

Placing defendants in locked cages

This refers to the report, "Egypt courts jail more than 160 Morsi backers" (TDS, May 19). When Morsi was being tried, a discerning viewer of television news of this trial could notice that Morsi was pacing up and down in a cage. This practice of bringing defendants in locked cages to the court for trial is common even in Western nations like France, Canada and Australia, apart from Russia, former Soviet Republics of Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. These cages are known as docks and are made of wood or a combination of wood and glass. The International Criminal Court in the Hague and American courts opine that these cages are prejudicial. The live broadcast of courts' proceedings has brought this to the scrutiny of legal experts, rights experts and also judges. Putting someone in a cage amounts to punishing the defendant, even though he/she has not been pronounced guilty by the court.

Officials in favour of these docks say that it keeps in check the violent behaviour of the suspects and also keep the defendants safe from the hostile public. But the European Court of Human Rights has criticised the use of locked docks as degrading and inhuman.

Deendayal M. Lulla
Mumbai, India

Comments on news report, "Crime pays back," published on May 22, 2014

Akhtar Shah

Two dozen lawsuits including murder, extortion, tender manipulation, illegal occupation of sand extraction land! He's a very experienced and trained politician then.

Mahbub Noor

It is known that every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

Nazmul Haq

All untimely deaths are deplorable and condemnable; but I also firmly believe in natural law in a sense that, what goes around also comes around.

Saint

One may be guilty, one may do heinous work but such incident will never be accepted.

"Dhanmondi playground half open" (May 23, 2014)

Anonymous

If kids can enter through the side gates, I don't see how it will stop "young boys from entering with their girlfriends, access of vagabonds, prostitutes". Cheers to the club's convener Sheikh Iqbal Khokon!