

Japan's development assistance

Multi-billion dollar investment welcome

IN a much welcome move, the Japanese government has pledged to provide nearly US\$6billion in economic assistance to the country. This comes forth by virtue of the prime ministers of Japan and Bangladesh negotiating a landmark deal. Kudos to both of them.

Spread over a period of four to five years, the aid will be given to implement the concept of The Bay of Bengal industrial growth belt (BIG-B) as proposed by the Japanese premier. This envisages fast track development of infrastructure, power development and the development of human resources in Bangladesh. Needless to say, the country's growth has been severely affected by the lack of infrastructure and adequate power and a skilled workforce. Hence, investments in these areas will go a long way in transforming Bangladesh into a middle-income country by 2021.

The country will receive the assistance primarily in the form of government loans. The multi-year package will cover public works such as construction of roads and power plants. It signals Japan's belief that the country holds significant economic potential. The multi-billion dollar assistance from Japan comes on the heels of a large investment package from China, which is also investing heavily in upgrading the country's infrastructure, power sector and communications facilities. With two of the largest economies of the world contributing to rapid development in Bangladesh, there is anticipation that trade and industrial growth in Bangladesh will see marked improvement in the coming years.

Of course, economic development can be fostered and sustained if the political climate remains congenial. That is one area that needs addressing and we hope that the major political parties can overcome their differences in the greater interest of the country's future development.

Reducing maternal mortality

Fault lines need to be bridged

BANGLADESH has significantly reduced mortality rate from 322 per 100,000 childbirths in 2000 to 170 in 2013. At this rate we may well reach the UN's goal (MDG) of 145 deaths per 100,000 childbirths by 2015. Even so absolute number of maternal deaths remains high.

But why should pregnant mothers in their advanced stage suffer and die during delivery despite the existence of health infrastructure comprising community clinics, health complexes and hospitals at the union, upazila and district levels? Experts working with the government, non-government as well as UN agencies at a discussion met on Monday tried to find answers to this question? The fault lines in the maternity care and reproductive health service delivery have been many. It goes without saying that those health facilities are inadequate in terms of skilled manpower as well as materials including medicine and machinery. More medics, paramedics and birth attendants are necessary at those facilities. But what about the mentality of the family members of the childbearing mothers to have the child delivered at home rather than at health clinics or hospitals under the supervision of doctors? So, the need for increased awareness in favour availing themselves of the existing facilities among those families can hardly be overemphasized. That apart, in many cases doctors are not willing to stay at the health complexes situated in rural areas. These are undoubtedly some of the big obstacles that have to be removed for reaching the goal of safe motherhood.

Poverty at its worst

A Little Girl from Rampal

SHAZIA OMAR

WHEN Fatima was returning home from the Union Council Chairman's office, she had no idea that the disappointing evening was about to get worse. She had gone to the Chairman's office with her mother and younger brother; because they had heard saris were being distributed. They found, instead, a large queue of angry women and children but no saris.

On their way home, Fatima heard a scuffle in the bush and thought it was a ghost. If only she had been so lucky. In the dark, she could make out the silhouette of two men, one with a hammer in his hand. The men attacked, pushing her mother to the ground. Fatima saw to her horror, the dacoits were none other than her uncles, her mother's younger brothers. While her brother begged them to stop, Fatima ran for help. She ran straight to the police station and returned with the police to her mother's rescue.

Her mother had suffered major injuries to her head and knees and remained in the hospital for two weeks. During this time, Fatima was afraid to return home, a small hut where she lived with her maternal uncles, her mother's would-be assassins.

Fatima's mother had left her husband some two years earlier when he remarried. They had moved in with Fatima's maternal grandparents, uncles and uncles' families. Though her mother earned a meagre income as a seamstress and contributed to the household expenditures, they begrudged her, as the hut was small and all of them had to live in very cramped conditions.

After the attack, Fatima began doing odd chores for neighbours, to pay for the medical bills. She stayed with a friend's family. She tried to press charges, but her uncles bribed the police. Neighbours were shocked but could do very little to help. When her mother was finally well enough to return home, they went back to their corner of the hut, and pretended nothing had happened.

Now, 5 years later, Fatima still lives with her uncles. Their position has deteriorated, as her grandmother has died. Fatima has scored an A+ in her studies (grade 9), despite the challenges in her life. She desperately wants to complete her SSC, but she is afraid that if anything happens to her mother, no one will pay for her schooling and in fact, she will have nowhere to stay.

Fatima is bright, brave and beautiful, but most likely she will be married off soon and left to live the rest of her life cloistered within a single room. With over 4 million extremely poor adolescent girls like Fatima in our country, I shiver when I think of what enormous heartbreak and suffering we cause them. If we could empower Fatima and all the others like her, so that they could all bloom, what a mighty garden we might have in this country of ours!

This is a true story, but the names have been anonymised.

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India's democracy, warts and all

GROUND REALITIES



Syed Badrul Ahsan

And yet in July 1972, Indira Gandhi and Indian democracy impressed him to no end. Indian pluralism had, after all, beaten Pakistani militarism black and blue in all the wars the two nations fought between 1948 and 1971.

Democracy in India has certainly had its difficult moments. The Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in June 1975 certainly did not do it proud. And it surely made Mrs. Gandhi pay the price. And, yes, democracy in India has largely been hostage in the hands of the Nehru-Gandhis. The ramifications have been there: smaller dynasties have sprouted all around. Democracy has thrown up such sycophants as DK Barooah, he who saw in Indira in all of India. It has produced pliant presidents like Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed. It has manufactured fearsome elements like Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. The Emergency brought Sanjay Gandhi into the picture, before democracy put him in his place at the 1979 elections.

Democracy in India has been no laughing matter. When Field Marshal SHF Manekshaw casually informed Indians, through a media interview in the early 1970s, that had he wished, he could have taken charge of the country after the 1971 war, he was ridiculed from one end of the country to another. Indians have little patience for men like VK Singh, who could not impress the country with his assertions of his real age. And, if you have noticed in recent days, India's political system does give room to upstarts to make a beginning but soon makes it clear that upstarts must not dwindle into being jokers. You have Arvind Kejriwal as a shining instance of how a promising career can bite the dust through a commission of blunders and tomfoolery.

There are lessons that can be learned from the noise and din of Indian democracy. India's history has given it a secular, cosmopolitan Nehru eminently qualified to place the country on a high pedestal among the nations of the world. It has had self-effacing prime ministers like Lal Bahadur Shastri, who have never forgotten their humble beginnings and have lived in simplicity right to the end of their lives. Given that tradition, it becomes easy for you to understand why Narendra Modi has reached the heights

ZULFIKAR Ali Bhutto, in his moments of necessary reflection as the twilight of his life drew closer, spoke of the beauty ingrained in the noise and din of India's democracy. That, perhaps, was the ultimate tribute to a nation, especially from a man who had spent nearly all his political life trying to humiliate what he thought was a hegemonistic India. In the 1970 election campaign in Pakistan, Bhutto went around accusing Indira Gandhi of all sorts of conspiracies against Pakistan.

he has. Only in India (and in places like America) can you expect a chai wala to symbolize the power and glory of the nation someday. India has had a place for bitter men as well. Read Mani Shankar Aiyer here. The diplomat-turned-politician did himself no favours by ridiculing Modi's childhood poverty. The recent election has shown why Aiyer is the man trapped in intellectual poverty. Modi has reached out to the world. And the world is coming to him.

Only in India can you have a Jyoti Basu rule a state for ages and then have his successor go out of power swiftly. Indian democracy has always kept its doors open for people from other professions to come into it and keep the system going, despite the shocks some of them have caused among observers of politics. Jayaprada, once described by Satyajit Ray as the most beautiful woman in India, has had a fruitful stint in politics; and Vinod Khanna has been minister of state for external affairs. Now you have Moon Moon Sen coming into the picture. Scores of such stories are out there for you to read and reflect on. MJ Akbar, Bappi Lahiri and, in another day age, Bhupen Hazarika and Victor Banerji may have shocked us by making it into the Bharatiya Janata Party, given that our secular values have consistently defined our view of life. But who are we to complain?

India's democracy makes it possible for a Tarun Tejpal to pay for his sexual peccadilloes. It sends ministers and thespians to prison and its Criminal Bureau of Investigation does not wait for the country's prime minister to issue directives for the arrest of highly-placed individuals accused of criminal conduct.

In India, political pluralism has created the conditions that have an Election Commission hold absolute sway over the right of India's people to make their choices at the polling stations. No politician or political party, no government will dream of trying to influence the commission into genuflecting before its wishes. In India, a Meira Kumar will not complain of rigging at the ballot booth if she loses the election. The opposition will not stay away from parliament when it does not win the polls.

Indian democracy has the courage to put entrenched dynasties to electoral flight. It gives you a poetic Atal Behari Vajpayee and a cantankerous Morarji Desai. It has place for a Jagjivan Ram. It honours an Abul Kalam Azad and a Zakir Hussain and an APJ Abdul Kalam.

India has shown, and shown decisively over the years, that for all its poverty and its iniquities and its divisions, it has room for diversity. It can catapult the Hindutva advocate Narendra Modi to high office, without making people forget the secular Gandhi and the philosophical Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and the agnostic Jawaharlal Nehru.

India gives you Amartya Sen.

Indian democracy, warts and all, remains an edifying instance of what political modernity and cultural heritage are and ought to be.

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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Swing to the right

GILLIAN DELL

ELECTIONS to the European Parliament came to a close on Sunday, following balloting in the 28 member countries on 22-25 May. Voters chose 751 parliamentarians to represent the 500 million citizens of the European Union. The territory has a combined GDP of EUR 13 trillion, which is the largest in the world. The shock results emerging on Sunday night confirmed widespread fears of a swing towards extreme right-wing Eurosceptic parties across the continent.

Voting started in the UK and the Netherlands on 22 May, and concluded with polling in twenty-one countries on Sunday 25 May. Exit polls showed citizens in at least six countries embracing right-wing populist, racist, anti-immigrant polemic. In the UK was there was a resounding victory for the anti-EU, anti-foreigner UKIP party and in France the right-wing Front National looked set to take a resounding 25% of the vote. Results in Austria, Denmark and Hungary also indicated a sharp swing to the right in those countries. In Greece, the left-wing Syriza movement headed by the charismatic Alexis Tsipras, was headed for a big win and at the same time the neo-fascists of the Golden Dawn party looked set to win 10% of the vote.

Overall, Europe's Christian Democrat bloc appear to be emerging as the biggest grouping in Parliament, albeit with a loss of seats and the Social Democrats are expected to come in second place, gaining ground over the previous election.

The supranational European Parliament supplements 28 national legislatures and is one of the two main institutions in the European Union providing democratic legitimacy. The other one is the European Council, comprising heads of state or government of the individual states, These two institutions share both legislative powers and control of the EU's EUR 142 billion budget—the budget finances a spectrum of work ranging from rural development and environmental protection to border protection and human rights. The European Commission, the EU's executive arm and civil service located in Brussels, reports to the European Parliament and for the first time the Parliament will elect the next President of the Commission. Over time, the Parliament's powers have been growing, but voters' interest has declined nonetheless.

Since the last elections in 2009, the EU has gone through a major economic and financial crisis, with massive bailouts in Greece, Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus imposing harsh conditions that many consider exacerbated the downturn in those countries. Youth unemployment has continued high since the crisis started, averaging about 25% across the continent, with highs of nearly 60% in Greece and Spain and a low of about 8% in Germany. This naturally promotes increased migration between European countries.

The crisis and its handling has resulted in a sharp decline in citizen confidence in the EU and its institutions. It exposed weaknesses in the design of the European Monetary Union, which establishes the convergence criteria for joining the euro, the European common currency. Eighteen EU countries have already joined and introduced the euro. As part of this project, in the late 1990's the EU introduced a rigid fiscal discipline that was inconsistently applied across countries. A new and controversial Euro Plus Pact was introduced in 2011 by the Council of Economic and Financial Ministers to strengthen and give more rigour to the original pact.

In the worst affected EU countries ordinary citizens resent the high price they are paying for the common currency. In the richer countries, especially Germany, there is widespread discontent with the high cost of bailing out countries that are viewed as fiscally irresponsible. The whole euro currency project has been called into question as ill-advised and in the process has raised fundamental doubts about the intentions and competence of EU and national leaders.

This has undermined acceptance of the EU, which had been growing. EU citizens had increasingly embraced a European identity and come to appreciate the benefits of

peace, prosperity and democracy associated with the union, as well as more open markets and greater mobility. Before the crisis, in 2009, a poll showed that 15 % of EU citizens had a negative view of the EU and 50 % held a positive view. The Eurobarometer survey of 2013 showed a significant shift, with 29 % of EU citizens having a negative attitude towards the EU and only 30% with a positive attitude.

In France, a poll published on 20 May and cited by US economist Paul Krugman said that fewer than 40 percent of France's citizens think the EU is "a good thing"; 54 percent think the euro's more trouble than it's worth; and less than half even plan to vote.

The decline in trust in EU institutions has not been helped by national media that devotes little space to the work of European institutions and frequently portrays them as bloated, technocratic and interfering. Nor does it help that to date the European Parliament attracts a more mediocre class of candidates than can be found on the ballot at national level. If you ask people to name outstanding representatives in the European Parliament they are hard-pressed to name more than three.

Added to that, decision-making by the EU civil service is often seen to lack sufficient accountability and there is a popular perception that business lobbyists hold an undue sway over decision-making in Brussels and in Strasbourg (where the Parliament meets). On 24 April 2014, Transparency International issued a report highlighting corruption risks in ten EU institutions. The report identified major flaws such as the absence of mandatory lobbying rules and the growing trend of EU institutions to negotiate laws behind closed doors. It also cited as a deficiency that there is no independent monitoring of the application of ethics rules to senior officials.

An increasing number of citizen's initiatives are working to achieve greater accountability. In the lead-up to the European Parliament elections, an NGO coalition has been campaigning to get future members of the European Parliament to commit to support the regulation and transparency of lobbying pledging to "stand-up for citizens and democracy against the excessive lobbying influence of banks and big business." As of 21 May, over 1100 candidates in 19 countries had signed up. Other groups have conducted hackathons producing information about MEP voting records and asset declarations.

Doubts about the way Brussels functions, combined with economic setbacks has provided fertile ground for extreme right-wing parties across Europe. The attraction of their extremist positions may also have resulted from a lack of mainstream, moderate debate about Europe which has driven the policy dissenters to the fringes. The populist right offers refuge for those questioning Europe and for those on the losing end of the project. They also provide a haven for those on the conservative and religious side of social issues, especially regarding homosexuality. This was demonstrated by reactions to the success of a bearded transvestite named Conchita Wurst in the Eurovision song contest on 8 May. The various right-wing parties also have in common their pro-Russian inclinations.

By way of a counter-impulse, the recent crisis in the Ukraine has breathed new life and attractiveness into the European Union, especially in the eastern part of the continent where a common fear of Russian incursions may have played a role in dampening the rise of anti-EU parties.

With the election results now in, the next big milestone for Europe will be the selection of the President of the European Commission, where the lead contenders are Luxembourg's former Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, the centre-right candidate, and the German Martin Schulz, of the centre-left. In light of the dramatic gains made by anti-EU parties, the European agenda for the next five years is unlikely to include any steps in the direction of a real EU federation. Indeed, turbulent times may lie ahead for the European Parliament just when its powers have expanded and other EU institutions may also face increased roadblocks.

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LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

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Relocate Kamalapur Railway Station

The railway tract meanders through the heart of the city at more than two dozen points before it reaches its ultimate destination, Kamalapur. The traffic movement comes to a standstill causing serious impediments to regular commuters. Transportation of goods and commodities is greatly affected and all these have serious consequences on the national economy.

The idea of having a modern railway station at Kamalapur was conceived in the early sixties. At that time, the requirement suited to that of a growing provincial capital. Since independence, with the sudden transformation of the city into the national capital, the population has increased more than twenty fold. The movement of passengers as well as goods has increased tremendously.

Why on earth should the railway enter the city at Banani and travel all the way to Kamalapur? I request the authorities concerned to immediately relocate the railway station outside Dhaka, preferably to Tongi. The Inland Container Depot should also be shifted elsewhere. The existing railway track from Banani to Kamalapur should be developed as national highway. This will provide the city dwellers with an alternative road and help remove the traffic congestion to a great extent.

Dr. Shamim Ahmed
One e-mail

Why kill animals for education?

The purpose of education is to acquire knowledge, develop sound mind and have respect for life. But in the process of imparting education, hundreds of thousands of animals are being killed every year to get students acquainted with the anatomy and physiology of animals. Both vertebrate and invertebrate animals are dissected at the different educational institutions. The most common vertebrates include frogs and cats.

In the US alone, more than 100,000 cats are dissected in classrooms across the country annually by the students of junior and senior high schools and colleges. Many international ethical bodies and animal protection groups have raised a question whether it is essential to kill such a huge number of cats to teach anatomy to the students. We can alternatively use anatomy models, charts, computer programs for delivering instructions on the same.

Professor M Zahidul Haque
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Comments on news report, "Khaleda for probe commission," published on May 23, 2014

Mortuza Huq
I think it is a very legitimate demand at this moment. The fascist acts of the present government will not do any good to Awami League in the long run.

Monju Huq
She has been demanding so many things almost on daily basis and it is difficult to understand which demands she really mean, and which are political rhetoric. As a result, the well-merited demands lose their importance along with the insignificant ones. As a national leader she should be selective in demanding something which the government can not just ignore.

"Vicarious pleasure in Modi victory" (May 22, 2014)

Nds
It appears that the fate of our rival political parties depends on who wins the Indian election, not on the will and aspirations of our people. Shame on both these parties and their followers. When in his own country, he is disliked by 69% of the people, he has become the most favourite leader of our two political parties.

OpeeMonir
Our politicians do not show any maturity that we expect from them. This is very disheartening.

"Cops curb driving on wrong side" (May 24, 2014)

Ibrahim Zaman
These spikes are mainly used by the "on-payment parking lots" for preventing cars to enter their premises through the exit way for dodging parking fees. These types of spikes are very common in many Western countries and they don't cause much harm to the tires if you pass them at slow speeds. But putting them in the middle of the roads isn't a good idea at all. The drivers will have to slow down to the speed or may have to end up with 4 ripped-off tires.