

MODI'S VISIT TO BANGLADESH

Enthralling Modi, Enthusiastic Bangladesh

Modi's action-packed visit ends

Stage set for a huge impetus to Indo-Bangla relations

INDIAN PM Narendra Modi must have left Dhaka a satisfied man achieving demonstrative success in clinching the deals with Bangladesh that India had been striving for. Apart from the long-awaited LBA, a record number of 22 deals, MOUs and renewals were struck with Bangladesh.

All this happened under the tapestry of very warm welcome that the government and people of Bangladesh accorded to him, Mamata Banerjee and his delegation. Media in its coverage has been highly laudatory, even bordering on the euphoric about the Modi visit. Headlines like 'Dawn of a new era', 'Visit full of expectations' and 'New horizon opening to relations' made Modi almost appear as a positive influence for change.

Basically, we repose faith in Modi as a man of action and persistence to get things done. In this light we welcome Modi's expression of confidence to reach a solution on the long-standing issues of the Teesta and Feni rivers. 'Humanitarian concerns' as they are, these are matters of rights as well of co-riparian country. It took four years since LBA and Teesta looked like done deals during Manmohan Singh as PM but Teesta can't brooke that kind of a delay.

Modi's meeting with leaders across the broad political spectrum, especially with BNP leader Khaleda Zia, has been a politically correct step.

We look upon Modi with high hopes to deliver on his 'neighbour first policy' with Bangladesh-India relations as a major component of the policy paradigm.

A hospital without electricity

Contingency plan required

THE patients at Chittagong Medical College Hospital have gone through untold sufferings due to lack of electricity for three days, as the hospital administration failed to repair the 60-year old transformer that exploded last Thursday, according to a report published in this newspaper.

While the hospital authority has managed to provide electricity to the emergency unit, operation theatre and ICU through alternative power supplies, most of the wards remained without power, among them the dialysis and the pathology units, leaving patients in dire conditions. The sweltering heat of the summer and a water crisis subsequent to the power outage made matters even worse for the ailing patients who desperately needed nursing as much as they needed medical treatment.

This bizarre incident symbolises the broken state of the country's healthcare delivery systems—often characterised by lack of resources, poor management, a very high rate of absenteeism among doctors and nurses, lack of regulation on prices of medicine and sometimes, sheer negligence.

While many rural areas of the country now have accessible community outreach healthcare systems in place, in big cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong the vast majority of healthcare services are still based in hospitals some of which are in deplorable conditions.

With a 10 percent increase in allocation for healthcare in this year's national budget, we expect to see some real changes in the way healthcare services are delivered to the masses. But more money will not automatically translate into better quality unless management of hospitals is smart, efficient and prepared to deal with emergencies such as power outages in order to reduce the needless sufferings of patients.



important factor in Bangladesh's socio-economic and geo-political life.

Therefore, visits of Indian celebrities and politicians create huge interest in this country. The visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been the most significant visit for Bangladesh in recent times. Since he took office one year ago, Modi has been travelling all over – the powerful, the rich and the strategic countries from North to South and from East to West – to build the image of his country and to strengthen economic and political ties with countries which matter in global politics. So his visit to Bangladesh, despite his busy globe-trotting schedule, carries immense significance. He obviously didn't forget his regional role. This dynamic leader of South Asia who wants to develop India by focusing on five Ts - talent, tradition, tourism, trade and technology - rightly realised that in order to be part of the global power league, India needs to establish and maintain its regional clout through economic and political strategies.

Even before his arrival, Mr. Modi made his gesture by operationalising the long disputed Land Boundary Agreement between the two countries. With his physical presence in Bangladesh, he offered much more on the economic front as well including connectivity, trade and finance that would be beneficial for both

countries which has not been the case so far. For example, bilateral trade relations have not been a win-win situation for both countries as it favours India only. Trade imbalance with India has widened from USD 332 million in FY1993 to USD 5,579 million in FY2014. After China, currently India is the second most important source of Bangladesh's import. In FY2014, Bangladesh imported goods equivalent to USD 6,036 million as opposed to its export to India worth only USD 456 million.

This has not improved even after the preferential market access granted by India to the least developed countries of SAARC in 2011. High tariff barriers, poor infrastructure facilities, slow clearance of goods, complex customs requirements and lack of quality testing facilities near border points have been the blockades for higher trade. Doing Business Reports of the World Bank reveal that in terms of ease of trading across borders, South Asian region has been consistently ranked second last, only after Sub-Saharan Africa. This underscores the need for trade facilitation, improvement of supply side capacity of Bangladesh as well as mutual recognition of various quality related requirements such as standards, certification, and testing which are essential for reaping benefits from trade agreements.

On the part of Bangladesh, product diversification has been emphasised for increasing its exports not only to India but also to the global market. But trade patterns of Bangladesh with India look different from that of the global ones. While 80 percent of Bangladesh's total exports are readymade garments at the global level, it is only 20 percent in case of India. This shows that there is an opportunity for product diversification for exporting to the Indian market. It also indicates that RMG exports to India could still be increased, particularly when India has a large middle class with growing purchasing power.

For realising intra-regional trade potentials, transit and connectivity issue was high on the agenda of Mr.

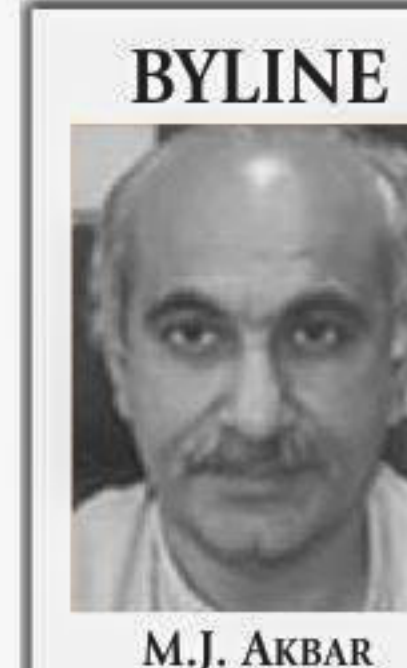
Modi's tour. Ironically, even after the implementation of the SAFTA, intra-regional trade in South Asia is only 5 percent, compared to 22 percent in the ASEAN and 55 percent in the EU regions. Poor transportation between Bangladesh and India, and within the region as a whole, is a major obstacle. Weak infrastructure leads to higher cost of doing business in South Asia - by about 13 to 14 percent of the GDP of the region. Studies also indicate that intra-regional trade could be raised by about 60 percent through improving South Asia's infrastructure to about half of what East Asia has. So, connectivity among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal is crucial to improve trade-related efficiency. But issues such as appropriate charges and security have to be dealt with due sensitivity for the effectiveness of such collaborations.

The gesture of providing a fresh soft loan equivalent to USD 2 billion for infrastructure projects by Mr. Modi's government is also well-appreciated. We expect that there will be no strings attached to this support. Aid conditionalities create various complications including delay in the implementation of projects as was experienced in case of the earlier line of credit equivalent to USD 1 billion that was provided in 2010 by India. At a time when OECD countries have agreed to reduce tied aid through a formal framework under the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005, aid conditionalities from India would go beyond the spirit of cooperation. This spirit can of course be upheld through strong political will.

For the last several weeks, Bangladesh has been beaming with glory at the prospect of the gracious steps of Mr Modi on this land of ours. Now that the visit is over and the cards are on the table from both sides, the people of Bangladesh will look forward with similar enthusiasm and hope to the implementation of the promises.

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Why Bangladesh isn't Pakistan



THIS week we can bury a misconception that has appropriated the subcontinent's discourse since 1947, when a Muslim League-British project partitioned the land in the name of religion. India's problem with Pakistan has nothing to do with Pakistan's emergence as a Muslim nation. The problem has always been, and continues to be, Pakistan's state sponsorship of terrorism against India.

Pakistan's initial policy of "war by other means" quickly evolved into the broader framework of "war by all means". Ninety percent of Bangladesh is Muslim. Till 1971 it was part of Pakistan. India has a much larger border with Bangladesh than with Pakistan, with a territorial dispute since the British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe, nominated by London to demarcate lines of separation, deepened the wounds of partition by using a scalpel with an uncertain, and occasionally anarchic, hand.

This week Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed a pact in Dhaka with his counterpart, Sheikh Hasina, that erases a dispute as old as Kashmir. The term 'historic' has become trite through general overuse, but this pact deserves such an accolade.

We tend to be sanguine or cynical about success, and so hypnotised by bad news that media often gets hypnotised by the negative. Moreover, major television channels have become so Delhi-centric that we forget India lives in its states. A municipal problem in the capital consumes time with the appetite of an elephant, while a game-changer in Bengal is sidelined to the margins.

We should not underestimate the Dhaka treaty. A wall that started as brick, transformed into stone and was turning concrete, is coming down. Once India and Bangladesh can put the past behind them, the east will discover a future through economic and cultural harmony.

An economy can always find its way through political boundaries, as Europe or North America or Southeast Asia have proved. But it cannot break through hostility. Economic success is always faster and, well, more economical, with cooperation.

The two Bengals and the northeast of India are natural partners in the timeless search for greater prosperity. But an equal partnership is only possible through trust and trust can only mature through experience.

This is also a major delivery axis for an important commitment made by Modi during the 2014 election campaign: the revival of the east, which has lagged behind the rest of India for a variety of reasons, of



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina welcoming Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh.

which the most important is surely the sterile, formulaic thinking of Marxists who ruled West Bengal for three and a half decades. The quality of Modi's leadership has been evident in the quiet, but effective, way he resolved both internal and external obstacles.

Thoughtful regional icons are responding to the Prime Minister's repeated exhortation that the people's interest must prevail over partisan politics. That is why Mamata Banerjee flew in to Dhaka. Battles are fought during elections. When over, state and Centre must cooperate to serve India.

Parties trapped in an ostrich mentality, like Congress and the Left, will lay nothing more productive than an infertile egg. Foreign policy, however, can only go as far as domestic opinion takes it. Why are Indians ready for a deal with Dhaka but wary of Islamabad?

There is, of course, a fundamental difference between Bangladesh and Pakistan in the fundamentals of the state; but esoteric reality does not get the public traction it possibly deserves. Indians are impressed by Sheikh Hasina's visible and sustained war against terrorists. She has contained faith-based political formations, and cracked down against violence-addicted extremists.

In this respect she has altered the dynamics of Bangladesh politics, and this legacy will be hard to subvert. In contrast, terrorism remains an integral part of Islamabad's catechism no matter who is in power.

Pakistan set the template for state-sponsored terrorism from the day it was born. In retrospect it is astonishing that its leaders were not deflected even by

the human catastrophe that accompanied partition, or the economic burden of sudden birth.

Within days of entering office, Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan began plotting an illegal war to seize the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This operation began in October 1947, and has not ended. Pakistan Army Chief Raheel Sharif confirmed as much when he said that Kashmir is an unfinished agenda of partition.

The cost of such colossal irresponsibility has been extremely high, particularly for Pakistan. If Pakistan had not opted for war, the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, which had not joined either India or Pakistan in August, would have been resolved over the table, probably in the presence of Britain, since the legality of independence was determined by an act of the British Parliament. Pakistan destroyed the chance of peace for generations.

Bangladesh won freedom through a war of liberation. It was not simply a geographical departure from Pakistan but also an ideological recast. This has enabled Bangladesh to pursue its national interest on the basis of different parameters. Its differences with India, where they exist, are not based on the ideological premise that Hindus and Muslims are engaged in some form of permanent war.

India and Bangladesh can — if all goes well — walk, and work, together.

[The article was first published on June 4, 2015 in *The Times of India*.]

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

COMMENTS

"Top Thai army officer surrenders" (June 4, 2015)

Zaman Khan

It's a shame that a three star general committed such a crime. It is shameful for the Thai government. He should be court marshaled for various crimes: rape, unauthorised confinement, receiving ransom money, torture and for all the dead bodies found under Thai soil. When a three star Lt. General gets involved in such crimes, it is no wonder that traffickers were emboldened to continue such practices for years.

Natasha Onindita

He should get maximum penalty.

Md. Lutfar Rahman

Bangladesh government should arrest traffickers immediately.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Budget deficit goes up

Most dailies on June 4 highlighted the climbing trend of budget deficit and it was stated that it was the effect of the handsome pay rise for government officers. This pay rise should have been done by a body formed with senior and respected persons who are or were not government service officials. This is identified as one of the main causes behind the current budget deficit.

Interestingly, since government officials do not pay income taxes on their pay and allowances, in effect their tax burden is also financed by the government. Over and above this, many government officials who are enjoying government accommodation are owners of houses and flats. Over and above, many higher ranking officials in the government are entitled to free transport with driver.

This state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue further; private citizens in effect are to pay taxes to enable the government officials to enjoy tax free benefits on their salaries and allowances as well as transport expenses. The government officials should be taxed based on their overall taxable income.

Frustrated Taxpayer
 On e-mail

Missing 'letters' section

The 'letters' section of The Daily Star was absent in the last few days. In the past, a whole page was allotted (thrice in the week) for letters. Then two columns of page 6 were allotted for letters. And now sometimes it seems that The Daily Star has no space for letters!

'Letters' had been the readers' zone where the readers could vent their thoughts and opinions on diverse issues. I have been reading this newspaper since 1997 and have always enjoyed reading letters. We hope that the 'letters' section gets sufficient space, if not the whole page.
 Zabed Wali
 Chittagong

No Tobacco Day

Recently, the world celebrated 'No Tobacco Day' on May 31. Anti-smoking campaigns should move towards logical conclusions. Many third world nations do not have laws for class action suits unlike in nations like the USA and Canada. Recently, a Canadian court (Quebec superior court) awarded smokers C\$15.6 billion in damages to smokers in a historic class action suit. The judge has said that the three companies in question were guided by the profit motive and were not interested in the health of their customers. The grounds for damages were that the companies knew a harmful product was being sold but consumers were not told about the risks. There were two types of plaintiffs - those who were seriously ill and those who were unable to quit smoking. Damages were sought by more than a million smokers and former smokers. This judgement has come after a gap of 17 years - cases were launched in 1998 and the trial began in March 2012. Now the three companies will have to split damages and one company alone has been ordered to pay two-thirds of the total damages within 60 days. The companies in question have decided to go in for appeal. Such class action suits need to be initiated to deter smoking and tobacco-related products.

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