

## Power plants near Sundarbans

Independent impact study is in order

WE are all for adding to the current level of power generation, but without adversely affecting the ecology. We, therefore, concur with the recommendation of the National Committee to Protect Sundarbans, a citizen platform of 101 eminent activists and scholars, that the development activities of Rampal power plant and the adjacent private Orion power plant should be held in abeyance until a new environment impact assessment (EIA) is conducted by a UN-led independent team. The committee, which has consistently highlighted the dangers of constructing a coal power plant only 14 km away from the largest mangrove forest in the world, has also urged Unesco to recognise the Sundarbans on the list of its World Heritage in Danger.

Environmental experts, both in the country and abroad, have raised serious concerns about the EIA approved by the Department of Environment on August 5 2013, arguing that the assessment was flawed, unscientific, and downplayed the severity of the environmental cost of the project. Notably, the EIA was carried out by a government-owned institution rather than a non-partisan body, which may well give rise to questions. It is telling that the EIA was also rejected by various relevant national and international bodies; the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Bangladesh has also called for an independent scientific EIA. Last year, three French banks and two Norwegian refused to invest in the Rampal power plant for the risks it posed to the critical ecological area and highlighted the limitations with the current EIA.

Environmentalists' demands that the coal power plant be relocated to a different, less environmentally sensitive location have, thus far, fallen on deaf ears. The least the government can do is facilitate an independent EIA to objectively determine whether it's safe to carry on development activities in this region.

## Persons with disabilities

Include them in politics, decision making

PEOPLE with disabilities, at a recent workshop, have demanded equal access to all tiers of politics and we unequivocally endorse their demand. Although many programmes have been launched for their education, health and employment, they still have little or no representation in politics and decision making, a hindrance to their development as citizens of a free country. Both the state and the society must recognise the inherent dignity and worth as well as the equal and inalienable rights of all citizens of the country, including those who are differently abled as the foundation of freedom, justice and progress.

Given the prejudice and stigma, it is easy to imagine how disability might be regarded as a vote loser, or activists might be put off supporting disabled candidates who need extra support. But the fact is, they are equally, if not more, able to lead a meaningful life as active members of the society. We, therefore, agree with the deputy speaker of the Jatiyo Sangsad who expressed the view that a person with disability, if capable, can be a member of the parliament.

Before that can happen, certain steps must be taken, with a special focus on women, such as protecting the right of persons with disabilities to vote in elections without intimidation, and to stand for elections, to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitated by the use of assistive and new technologies.

## COMMENTS

**"US recognises Bangladesh's commitment to democracy: Embassy"**

(February 14, 2016)

Abu Elias Sarker

Bangladesh's commitment to democracy? What a joke!

Jahanara

Nowadays in Bangladesh, democracy prevails just in papers and political figures' rhetoric, not in practice.

Amina

Democracy doesn't exist in Bangladesh.

# Visa hassles for Bangladeshis

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE tourism industry has indeed become a major impetus to growth through its direct and indirect positives. In 2014, the sector directly contributed USD 2.4 trillion to global GDP and created employment for 105 million people. If the multiplier effect of the sector is taken into consideration, the overall contribution of the industry was USD 7.6 trillion, which was equivalent to 9.8 percent of total world GDP. The rate at which the sector is growing is currently higher than global economic growth.

Travelling however, is becoming more difficult each day. While countries promote tourism to increase their revenues, they have also made it tougher for tourists to visit. In addition to economic and social issues, security has been the key reason behind stricter travel permits to visitors from other countries. Needless to say that such security measures have never been foolproof. It can't be, given the nature of emerging global problems. If it were, the world would have been a much safer place to live in and roam around. In many cases, excessive and unreasonable strictness give rise to situations where common travellers suffer.

Take the example of the visa issuance to Bangladeshis by other countries. In line with the global trend, the number of Bangladeshis travelling outside the country is also on the rise. It reflects their necessity as well as affordability. For work, business, health, education, leisure, pleasure and adventure, mobility of Bangladeshis has increased several folds over the years. But applying for and getting a visa can be the most frustrating experience for a traveller. There are various means to discourage aspirant travellers. An exorbitant visa fee is the first barrier for the less well-off travellers. People would think twice before submitting

their papers. What if it is rejected? How many months' or days' salary would that be equivalent to? How long has it taken for them to save the money to go visit their grandparents in a foreign land? Those who earn in pounds, dollars and euros wouldn't probably feel the pinch.

A lengthy and complicated visa application form is another obstacle for general people in less developed countries such as Bangladesh. Less

people. While applicants, even after hundreds of attempts, aren't able to make a successful submission, a group of people sitting in cyber cafés keep filling up forms and jamming the system as soon as they are open for application. Initially, these middlemen charged Tk. 500 per application. But as the number of help seekers has increased, these opportunists have raised their fees to more than Tk. 3000 to fill up a form. It is now almost impossible

a letter of introduction from a citizen or permanent resident of the country you will visit if you do not have a ticket issued. Getting a confirmed ticket sometimes is not feasible, since there is the likelihood of a situation which could force you to change your travel plans. However, booking tickets beforehand to meet visa requirements is apparently the only option to most people, since they don't know anyone in the destination country. But there is always a way out. There are people out there who can get you a genuine letter of introduction if only you pay Tk. 8,000! The introducer may not know of your existence at all. It is not known whether they are also a part of this racket. But certainly they are undertaking a risk by writing a (false) letter saying that they know the traveller. If security is a concern for the visa issuing country, then why introduce a system which has loopholes and would encourage people to look for possibly risky alternatives? Why can't the process be kept simple and straightforward? It is absurd to expect that every traveller will have an acquaintance in the visiting country who can vouch for the traveller.

One may argue that there will always be means to dodge the system no matter how you design it. Also, in countries where people are less educated and less aware, there will be people who would try to take advantage of them. Many find it essential to take help for their visa applications. Those with an adequate idea about this process can provide such services in exchange of fees. But unfair means of exploiting ordinary travellers can be reduced significantly with cooperation from the visa issuing countries. After all, Bangladeshis travellers are also creating value for the global economy. They don't go abroad to solely take but also to give. As the country is poised to grow at a faster rate in the years to come, Bangladeshis will surely continue to contribute to the global economy even further.

Then there are countries which want to make an application individually without buying such 'tokens' from these newly emerged business of unauthorised brokers or so called *dalals*. The issue has been brought to the attention of the concerned visa office. We were told that this was a problem of our own and we had to deal with it. But it can be mutually solved through innovative ways to remove such unfair practices and by reducing the cost of visa applications.



educated travellers have to spend additional money to get their applications ready for submission. But this is only the beginning of their visa related expenditures in addition to visa fees. Technology has made work faster and smoother. But it has also made life difficult for some. The online submission of visa applications and getting a token number for visa to a neighbouring country has created opportunities for middlemen to exploit

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## Symptoms of the disease

BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYYAR

airbase at Pathankot.

The baggage of Partition, when the border was drawn on the basis of religion, has been carried on by three generations since then. The hatred has been increasing, particularly since there is no contact between the people living in the two countries.

On top of it, the books in Pakistan have distorted history and shown the Hindus in India in a bad light. Texts have been revised after protests by the liberals in Pakistan itself. Still, the history glorifies persons like Mohammad Ghaznavi, who destroyed the age-old Somnath temple in Gujarat. Some extreme Hindu elements have tried to rewrite history in India. But they met with little success because the secular character of the polity stalled them. They are still trying because they are finding some response.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's announcement that he would probe and punish the perpetrators of the Pathankot airbase attack comes as a light in the dark, endless tunnel dividing India and Pakistan. Against this background comes Nawaz Sharif's welcome assurance. Indeed, he is for peace but the question that remains is: will he succeed?

He was ousted by the then military chief, General Pervez Musharraf, who is being tried for treason. That he is on bail indicates the pressure the armed forces have exerted on Nawaz Sharif. The army, which has the last word in Pakistan, cannot afford to send to the gallows an ex-army chief, however heinous his crime is.

This also indicates the infirmity of the law when the accused is a member of the armed forces. Things have not stayed there. The military courts try the civil cases if the armed forces are even remotely connected. Religious forums trying the cases of blasphemy have no one, not even the apex court, to supervise. It is brave of Nawaz Sharif to make even a legitimate statement because he is being scrutinised by the military on the one hand, and the religious elements on the other.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has, indeed, helped him to gain stature inside Pakistan by his visit to Lahore. Modi has sensed that the state and non-state actors are opposed to a dialogue with India. That is the reason why the talks between the foreign secretaries of the two countries were rescheduled, not broken.

The understanding is essential because of anti-Pakistan sentiment which is being fomented in India. The extremists don't want the two countries to come closer because they thrive only in an atmosphere of enmity. They have even tried to stall prayers offered by women in some temples as well as mosques. On one side is the Shani Shingnapur Mandir in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra, on the other is the Haji Ali Dargha in Mumbai, with the average person helplessly

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watching the situation.

I have unnecessarily waited for government action against those who stopped the entry of women to the temple in Maharashtra. That Hindu fanatic fringe put women in the forefront to perpetuate men's superiority does tangle the problem. But the government should have seen through the game of fanatics.

Talking to some of them, I find that they firmly believe that sanctum sanctorum would lose its purity if women were allowed there. "We have allotted them enough space," some people argued. I was aghast at the reply because I could not understand who had given them the authority to stop women from praying in the temple's interior.

The Maharashtra government, apparently biased,

considered the matter a law and order issue and allowed the police to tackle it. The Modi government at the centre hid itself behind the fragile argument that the law and order was a state subject. But it was not a mere law and order problem. Women's right to places of worship is as much a constitutional right as it is of men. The extremists won the battle, proving once again that they can have a field day when it came to breaking religious rigidities.

Fortunately, there were some reactions and processions in a couple of cities against the issue. But this limited response only proves that India's democratic polity has a long way to go before it can implement women's basic rights to pray in any temple. I am told that the same practice prevails in mosques. For example, Haji Ali, the popular mosque in Mumbai, is barred to women.

Some years ago, a Kannada film actress had claimed that she touched the idol of Lord Ayyappa at the Sabrimala temple in Kerala. All hell broke loose after that, and the devotees of Ayyappa were incensed and demanded strict action against the once glamorous actress for hurting their religious sentiments. A case was filed in the Kerala High Court which was quashed six years later when the court ruled that the charges against the actress were invalid.

In fact, there are several other temples in India that prohibit the entry of women. Among them are Baba Balak Nath temple in Himachal Pradesh, Lord Kartikeya temple in Rajasthan and Patbasu Satra temple in Assam. I recall how some years ago former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was turned away from the Jagannath temple in Puri because she was married to a Parsi.

Similarly, a controversy was created when the famous Carnatic singer K.J. Yesudas, a devotee of Sri Krishna, was barred entry to the famous Guruvayur temple. I recollect another instance when purification was ordered at the temple after the ceremonial first feeding of former Union Minister Vayalar Ravi's grandson. The reason for purification was that the child's grandmother was a Christian. This was despite the fact that both the father and mother of the child were Hindus!

Such instances are due to the atmosphere of intolerance which is creeping into the body politics of the country. The nation has to be aware.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Appreciate the editor's honesty rather than bash him

The Daily Star editor Mr. Mahfuz Anam has recently been sued for defamation for admitting in a TV show that he had a lapse of editorial judgment in publishing news regarding 1/11. Ruling party politicians have raised a hue and cry regarding the issue, demanding the editor's punishment and bashing him

every day in media. Though Mr. Mahfuz Anam may have made a mistake in the past, the important thing is that he finally recognised and regretted it, which many others didn't do. I think we should admire his honesty and moral courage instead of criticise him.

Rifat Munir Eti  
A reader

### Improvement of image!

The recent crimes committed by the police against the populace depict the sorry state of affairs of the law enforcement agency and the extent of their illegal practices. It's not that all police personnel are bad or corrupt, but usually their good deeds are lost given their frequent and glaring bad deeds.

I couldn't help but be surprised when, following these incidents, our home minister stated that police were doing well and that their image had improved! I wonder what the definition of 'image' to them is.

A Taxpayer  
Dhaka

### Strange disclosure of information by CID

On February 3, 2016, it was reported in TDS that a Bangladeshi expatriate (Shahidullah) was kidnapped in South Africa and that the abductor's local agent in Bangladesh, Akhter, had contacted the victim's mother with a ransom demand of Tk. 25 lakh. After negotiation, the family agreed to pay Tk. 5 lakh, and a time and place was fixed for the ransom drop-off. Our CID police apprehended Akhter soon after he collected the money from the drop-off point. On interrogation, Akhter told the CID where Shahidullah was being held and

they passed on the information to the SA police. Now, one would have thought that the obvious course of action for the CID would have been to wait for confirmation from the SA police that the victim had been rescued before going public with the news. But that is not what happened. Didn't CID realise that they were seriously jeopardising the rescue effort by this premature disclosure? I hope TDS will follow up on this news and inform us of future developments.

Moinuddin M Nasrullah  
Lalmatia, Dhaka