

## Bangladesh-Myanmar rail connectivity

### Jumpstart the process

BAKING has finally taken the decision to get connected to the Trans-Asian railway, one of the most comprehensive networks of rail lines that connect Europe with Asia. The 129 km rail track will span from Dohazari to Gundum near Myanmar border via Cox's Bazaar. The original project was supposed to start in 2010. The delays we have faced in land acquisition and access to funding has meant inordinate delay, with the project cost shooting up from Tk1,852 to Tk18,034 crore. The feasibility study carried out by the Asian Development Bank necessitated changes in the original plan, for instance the move from metre gauge to broad gauge, all contributed to project delay.

Regardless of the hold-up in coming to a decision on this most strategic of connectivity issues, the construction of this rail line will facilitate massive cross border trade between the country with Myanmar and China. The movement of bulk goods from China to Bangladesh and vice versa by rail should shorten lead times significantly and open up new areas of business such as tourism. That we have lost valuable time which has raised the cost of this project manifold is not the question to ponder upon at this stage.

We understand that the railway ministry has been given three years to complete building of the rail line. While we applaud the government to make it a high priority project, we cannot but stress that our rate of implementation on mega projects has not been particularly impressive. And this is one area where all the good intentions of the government go to waste unless we can speed up the rate at which projects get off the ground.

## Grabbing garbage dump land

### What is the local administration doing?

WE are concerned by the report in this daily that the only piece of land meant for throwing garbage in Dinajpur municipality, has been merrily encroached upon by land grabbers. It has proved to be a severe blow to the waste management system of the municipality. In any urban space designated land is essential for garbage disposal. Otherwise where else will the garbage go? In this case the municipal authority has been compelled to dispose of the waste at different places along the highways and near public places like educational institutions, much to the discomfort of the public. Apart from spreading a horrible stench, such indiscriminate dumping of waste poses a serious threat to public health.

According to the municipal authority, the land was acquired by the government in 1963. In the last fifty years there was no dispute regarding the ownership of the site. But an influential quarter has been systematically encroaching upon the site since 2011 by forging land documents and exploiting legal loopholes. Recently, they have erected a brick structure on the land.

The citizen group "Dinajpur Moyla Gadda Dokholmukto Committee" has been protesting against the unmindful act. But the local administration seems to be oblivious to the suffering of the people. They are yet to take any action against the land grabbers. We urge the authority to look into this issue seriously. The local administration should immediately rescue the lands from the grabbers and ensure a sound waste management system in the municipality area.

## COMMENTS

### "Fire again in Sundarbans"

(April 19, 2016)

Momtaz

I wonder how these fires started in the first place. Isn't there anyone to look into this matter?

Pollabi Hasan

We need to save this precious forest at any cost. Officials of the Forest Department should stay alert of these types of incidents.

# Who is misleading whom?

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

THE EC has been under fire after two phases of UP elections were marred by widespread irregularities and violence. Media published numerous reports, and TV talk-shows held many discussions questioning the capability, neutrality and effectiveness of the Commission. Some of the partners of the ruling party were also very critical of the EC.

In the face of such criticism, the Director of Public Relations of the EC recently issued a press release, in which he claimed that the news media and TV talk-shows have been spreading misleading information about the Commission. The press release claimed that the irregularities were few and represented only isolated incidents. For instance, in the first phase, the elections of only 65 or 0.94 percent of the 6,780 centres and in the second phase, only 37 or 0.50 percent of the 6,880 centres were suspended. These statistics were used as evidence to claim that the elections were free and fair.

It is clear from the above statement that the commissioners are not clear about what constitutes a fair election. They should know that election is a process; it is not a one-day - only Election Day - affair. If they do not know that free and fair elections depend on what happens over a longer period of time, it represents a gross manifestation of their lack of knowledge. Incidentally, the issues of widespread violence and dozens of deaths were ignored in the press release.

Several yardsticks are used to determine whether an election is free, fair and acceptable: (1) whether the electoral roll used was inclusive, accurate, based on adult franchise and everyone eligible were enrolled; (2) those who wanted to be candidates could become candidates; (3) there were alternatives before the voters and the elections were competitive; (4) voters could safely go to the voting centres and freely cast their votes; and (5) the whole process was transparent and credible.

Based on these criteria, the first two

phases of the UP elections cannot be considered as free, fair and acceptable. In many upazilas, candidates from opposition parties, even those who belonged to collaborating parties of the ruling alliance, were prevented from submitting their nomination papers. Many of those who wanted to file nomination papers could not, because of cases, threats and other forms of intimidation while carrying out their election campaigns. As a result, BNP could not field candidates in 162 Unions and 87 chairmen candidates were elected unopposed in the first two phases, which clearly indicates that the

major achievements. It may be recalled that the electoral roll created during 2007-08, with the help of our armed forces, represented the most accurate roll. In that roll, there were over 14 lakh more women than male voters. A reason behind this could be the fact that despite the equality of proportion of men and women in our population, nearly one crore Bangladeshis work abroad, almost all of whom are male and many of whom are not voters.

Even though it is normal for more women to be in our electoral roll than men, nearly 47 lakh new voters were



PHOTO: STAR

elections were not competitive. Because of violence, fake voting, stamping and ballot box stuffing, many voters around the country could not cast their votes. The EC's unwillingness to take into cognizance the complaints of irregularities, its claim that elections were free and fair despite widespread irregularities, and other controversial actions by the Commission have raised serious questions about the transparency and credibility of the entire electoral exercise.

The present EC also appears to have compromised the integrity of our electoral roll, which represented one of our

added to the roll in 2014, the gender-gap was 12 percent, that is, women voters were 12 percent less than their male counterparts. Similarly, the gender-gap was over 5 percent when nearly 44 lakh voters were added during the updating process of the electoral roll in 2015. It is thus clear that in the updating process, women were under-enrolled in the electoral roll, which raises serious questions about the accuracy of the electoral roll used in the current elections.

It is also clear that the downward trend in the quality of our elections, which started from the general elections

# The Kohinoor story

## BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDEEP NAYYAR

A party which expects everyone to wear nationalism on their sleeves made the most anti-national statement. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) said

that the Kohinoor diamond was "offered" by Dalip Singh, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's son, to Lord Dalhousie and it belongs to Britain.

The angry comments following the statement made the party realise its mistake and it changed its stand abruptly. It said that the Kohinoor belonged to India and would be brought back through talks with the British.

The question is about facts, not how London would feel. True, there are two factions within the BJP, one in support of bringing back the diamond and the other believing that the Kohinoor belongs to the British. The party should know the facts and not reiterate what one of its factions feels.

Lord Dalhousie, the Viceroy, was keen to please his masters, the East India Company and Queen Victoria. He also wanted to further his career. Dalip Singh, a minor, was under his charge because he was the Viceroy after the British had defeated the Sikhs to annex Punjab.

Lord Dalhousie did not only take Dalip Singh to Britain after converting his religion but also appropriated the Kohinoor as a 'possession' of the British. He was so careful about the protection of the diamond that he did not take the usual Suez Canal route to London but went around South Africa, nearly twice the distance.

The Kohinoor was, no doubt, worth thousands of crores but it offered a sense of identity to India, and with it, a sense of authority. Ahmed Shah Abdali, one of India's rulers, forcibly exchanged turbans with Nadir Shah when he came to know

that the latter had tucked the Kohinoor under his turban.

Oblivious of all these facts, the BJP first washed its hands off the Kohinoor. But when it faced spontaneous angry comments, it went back on its original stand. Even if the Kohinoor was "offered" to the British - the BJP's first stand - the party must realise that the "offer" by the country, which was Britain's colony, meant nothing. It was not an offer of an elected

Delhi, for reasons best known to it, has not raised this matter by citing the UNESCO resolution. A country, which had colonies, has reasons to be reluctant. Why should India which has been a colony itself have any hesitation?

In fact, the British government had even questioned the ownership of Kohinoor. It said that after the birth of Pakistan, the ownership of Kohinoor could not be given solely to India but to

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government. Slave nations have no choice of their own.

I am, however, reminded of the discussion which I had initiated in the Rajya Sabha when I was its member in the late 90s. After having vainly raised the issue with the British, when I was India's High Commissioner, I thought the Parliament would see the wrong done to the country.

The debate had hardly taken off when the then Foreign Minister, Jaswant Singh, requested me not to pursue the matter. I was aghast when he said that the debate on the Kohinoor could adversely affect relations between India and Great Britain. Till today, I have not been able to get an answer to my question: How?

Even according to a UNESCO resolution, all the artifacts obtained by the rulers during their governance should be returned to the original owners. New

the two countries- India and Pakistan. In London, a foreign office high-up had defended Britain's decision not to return the Kohinoor, stating that the diamond belonged to Pakistan. I told him that the Brits should then return it to Islamabad. It would at least come back to the subcontinent and then we shall take up the matter from there.

It is clear that the British have no intention of returning the diamond or, for that matter, tons of material which is stored in the basement of museums in London. Though there was no response from England, France complied with the UNESCO resolution and gave up the relics which they had in their possession during their rule.

When the Nehru Corner was opened at London, I asked the curator how many materials from the museum's basement did they put on display. Her reply: 5 percent. Even then the entire expense was

of January 4, 2014 under the present Commission, continued through the two phases of the UP elections. In addition, we witnessed a few unique trends in the present UP elections which were absent in the past. For example, the so-called 'nomination trade' spread to the grass-roots, which corrupted both upazilas and our electoral system, and caused widespread de-politicisation. Furthermore, not only have we witnessed widespread violence and dozens of deaths, these took place over a longer period of time and were within the ruling party, which never happened before. We also saw for the first time, candidates from the opposition, even from the partners of the ruling parties, were prevented from filing their nomination papers or campaigning freely. All of these excesses and electoral offences were carried out openly, blatantly and without any hesitation. As a result, it is now increasingly being realised that free and fair elections, even UP elections, cannot be held under a politicised bureaucracy and law-enforcement agencies.

Incidentally, an argument can be made that the EC not only misled the people about the fairness of elections, it has also been breaking the electoral laws and rules. For example, even though the Voter Talika Ain, 2009 requires the electoral roll to be updated in January every year, the present EC started this task in May 2014 and July 2015. In addition, although the law requires the enumerators to go from door-to-door to update the electoral roll, they did not, as a result of which women were under-enrolled. Furthermore, despite the legal compulsion to update the electoral roll every year, in 2015, the EC collected information of 15-17-year-olds in order to avoid sending the enumerators to every household every year, which is a clear violation of the law. Even though the law requires the EC to publish electoral rolls on the website, the EC does not do so. How can one interpret such behaviour of the EC but as a breaking of the electoral law of the land?

The writer is secretary, SHUJAN.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Ensure safety measures during construction

A few days ago, the death of a construction worker who died when a rod fell on his head under the Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover and that of a child after a wall of an under-construction building collapsed on her give us a grim picture of the lack of safety measures in construction sites. Irresponsibility and negligence of the construction companies led to these incidents. The government should look into this matter seriously so that no more lives are lost in such mindless accidents.

Hashem Miah  
E-mail



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

### Being more considerate during festivals

On Pahela Baishakh, I went to visit my aunt who has been hospitalised for the treatment of brain tumour at the National Institute of Neurosciences and Hospital in Dhaka. I was shocked to hear loud music being played just beside the hospital. I understand it was the first day of Bangla New Year and people had every reason to celebrate. But they must do this shunning activities that cause discomfort and trouble for others including patients.

Sayek Ahmed Sajib  
Dhaka

### Awareness for earthquake

Since last year, the people of Bangladesh have experienced multiple tremors. This is a sign of an upcoming major earthquake. Most of the people of our country do not know the dos and don'ts before, during and after an earthquake. Bangladesh, especially Dhaka is prone to earthquake because of its geographical location.

The government, the NGOs and the media should play a more vital role in raising awareness among the people to minimise the damages caused by an earthquake.

Sheikh Zahid  
University of Dhaka

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.