

Underage working children

Nearly half of slum children school dropouts

AN extensive study covering 2,700 households titled “Child labour and education: a survey of slum settlements in Dhaka” was published on December 7 by the London-based Overseas Development Institute. The findings paint a dismal picture where about 45 percent slum children enter the workforce by the time they turn 14. Although Bangladesh has made great progress on a number of human development indicators including education, economic hardship and poor quality of education in slum areas are some of the reasons for such high dropouts. When we take into account the general economic plight families living in slums experience, coupled with a failure at policy level to ensure school attendance, the reasons are not difficult to comprehend as to why slum children are missing out on learning numeracy and literacy skills.

Unless steps can be taken to stop this massive outflow of children from the education system, it could end up jeopardising the country's prospects of achieving Bangladesh's 2030 development goals. A strong education is the backbone of any economy and with the child labourers having an education of not having completed more than Grade-3 will have an adverse impact in the years to come.

The only way to fight against child labour is if we keep our children in schools till they finish secondary education. We need to make education compulsory through strict enforcement. This means new laws and their enforcement to keep children in school. This must go hand in hand with making it very expensive through fines on industries that employ underage working children.

Differently abled persons

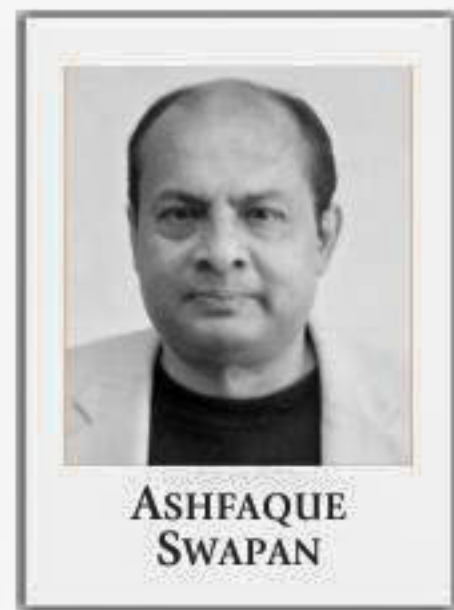
Recognise their abilities

IT is heartening to learn that the society is increasingly becoming aware of the presence of persons with disability in our midst, and also the fact that they are quite capable of contributing to national development and nation building given the opportunity and the facility to do. These came out very clearly in a seminar on inclusion of persons with disability in workplace organised by this newspaper along with the German development agency GIZ and Center for Disability in Development.

The number of persons with disability cannot be definitively ascertained since no census in this regard has been done as yet, but going by the criterion fixed by UN which assumes that there are about 15 percent disabled persons in the world, our share of it is quite large. And they cannot be written off. On the contrary, if trained appropriately they can become a useful component of our large human resource base. Thus the government's moves to frame appropriate rules and regulations for ensuring their employment and also setting up training facilities to prepare them sufficiently and suitably for absorption in the private sector is indeed timely and appropriate.

The seminar's focus was primarily on the RMG industry, it being the largest employer in the private sector. Given the huge export potential by the year 2012, the manpower needed in this sector would be about eight million. And although progress has been made in this regard there is need for a greater awareness among the RMG factory owners, and for that matter all private sector employers, that people with disability can and indeed deliver, in some cases more and better than the 'abled' persons.

The strange brouhaha over Uber in Dhaka



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

I have fond memories of Dhaka in my youth. This was in the mid-1980s, when Dhaka was not such a harrowingly dysfunctional metropolis. I used to move around town in a bicycle in my student days and even during early professional life – much to the despair of my status-conscious colleagues. It felt wonderful to go to my favourite haunts virtually any time I liked – the British Council was a wondrously rich library then, nestled in lush green. I spent a lot of time at the American Cultural Centre in Dhanmandi and I hung out with friends at Elephant Road or Road No. 2 in Dhanmandi. I was a regular at *Nirob*, a restaurant in old Dhaka, which served delectable, flaky *parathas* with fried, spicy

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PHOTO: UBER

brain. Or at the crack of dawn I would ride my bike to old Dhaka for an early breakfast of *hajir biryani*. Ah, the whiff of freshly cooked biriyani wafting on a cool winter morning still makes my mouth water!

Then over 25 years ago, I ended up living in the United States. Now I come to Dhaka every year in the winter to spend time with my mother. What pains me most is the difficulty in moving around. From Gulshan, going to see a friend in Dhanmandi is a nightmare. One doesn't know how long it will take, or even if transportation will be available. CNGs, which I use now, can be as elusive as the Royal Bengal tiger. CNG drivers in Dhaka must have been to Paris. How else could they have mastered so perfectly the haughty Parisian waiter's art of steadfastly avoiding eye contact?

I was excited when Uber came to Dhaka. I live in Atlanta. I haven't had a car for the past few months. Uber – and Lyft, a similar service – has been a life-saver. It's far cheaper than a regular taxi, and I have never to wait more than five minutes – and I have called Uber/Lyft in the wee hours of the night. I meet wonderful people along the way – students, homemakers, mature people who work a day job or go to night school, or both. Everybody is delighted with the new,

flexible source of income.

It is blindingly obvious that Uber is a Godsend for Dhaka. Let's face it – Dhaka is a dystopian nightmare of a megalopolis – traffic snarls cripple daily life. Dhaka is not alone. Call it the tyranny of economic circumstances in developing countries. Major cities, from Mexico City to Mumbai, Bangkok to Manila – each of these cities has become a dystopian, nightmarish megalopolis.

The Bangladesh Road Transportation Authority has decided, in its infinite wisdom, that Uber does not meet its regulations. Its critique of Uber reads like a parody of inert bureaucratic obtuseness. BRTA's objection is that Uber does not meet the standards of that state-of-the-art guide to civic life, the Jurassic-era motor laws created by the long-gone British raj at the beginning of the last century when Dhaka hardly had 100 cars, probably much fewer.

The suggestion that Uber cars must be painted and marked as taxis reflects an embarrassing failure to understand what Uber is. Uber is not a taxi service. It is a digital tool, and an ingenious one at that. What it does is use existing capacity to fill an urgent civic need without burdening the streets with extra traffic. An Uber vehicle is not a taxi, it is a judicious use of

the free time of a car which is otherwise used for personal or business reasons.

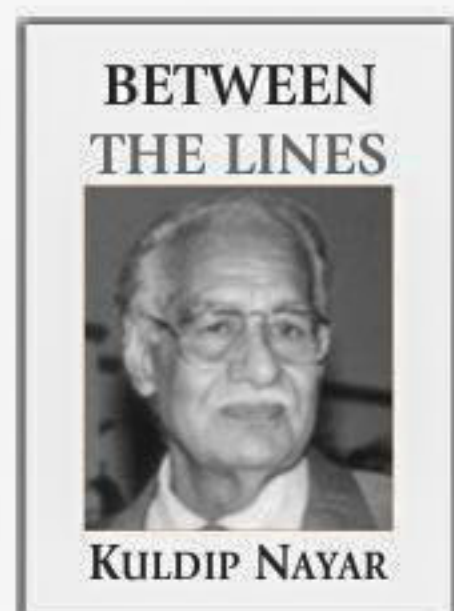
This is not to say that Uber does not have any hazards. Women Uber passengers have been assaulted in Delhi. But here again, Uber there is no reason for concern. Between Uber's records and vetting of drivers and the money trail left by passengers, both passenger and driver can be tracked if anything unpleasant happens.

Uber can ease the sense of helplessness for citizens of Dhaka who don't own a car, or don't want the hassle of being driven around every time they step outside their home. It could provide a new source of earnings – always welcome with our surging young population and very few jobs. It can do this without adding a single car on the roads.

I hope BRTA comes to its senses. Laws are made to serve people, not the other way around. BRTA should do the right thing sooner rather than later, and prove former Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban wrong. “Men and nations do behave wisely, after all other alternatives have been exhausted,” Eban once quipped.

The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconeer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States. He has been writing for US-based South Asian media for over 25 years.

Farooq should quit Rajya Sabha



KULDEEP NAYAR

BETWEEN THE LINES
YOU can tell from the speeches of Farooq Abdullah whether he is in power or not. Obviously, he is in the wilderness these days because the speeches he is making are bitter and blatantly

against India to the integrity of which he has sworn loyalty as a Rajya Sabha member. His latest is the support to the Hurriyat, which advocates secession of Kashmir from the country.

In his speech, he says: “I want to tell the workers of National Conference not be out of this struggle. I warn you: We are a part of this struggle. We have fought every time for the interests of this state.”

Farooq will be well advised to resign from the Rajya Sabha because he cannot be with India and the Hurriyat at the same time. In fact, I am shocked how a person who has been a Union Minister and Kashmir's Chief Minister can make such a statement which runs counter to the constitution. Significantly, he addressed the gathering in Kashmir.

Farooq is a person who has no control over himself when he is angry. He can say anything. I recall that when once he addressed the Aligarh University, he spoke like a fundamentalist. I, sitting at the same dais, chided him. In my speech, I said that he reminded me of the Muslim League days before partition when Mohammad Ali Jinnah would say that Hindus and Muslims were two different nations and would make the religion at the basis of nationality.

A couple of weeks ago, Farooq wrote in a Srinagar journal that his father Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah would have been happy that the Kashmiri youth had picked up the gun to support their demand for independence. I knew the Sheikh well and I do not think that he would have made such an irresponsible statement.

The problem with Farooq is that he wants to remain in headlines. To do so he would say anything. Is Farooq confident that what the Hurriyat is preaching is in the interest of the people in Kashmir, much less India? Has he ever weighed the repercussion of the valley's separation from the rest of country? Kashmir is a land locked territory and does not have an easy success to any place except India. The boys who are fighting against the

Indian forces are very clear about what they desired. Only recently when I was in Srinagar, many among them met me. They said that they wanted the valley to be converted into an independent sovereign Islamic state. They did not favour integration with Pakistan. Syed Ali Shah Geelani, a separatist Hurriyat leader does not represent them because he now wants Kashmir to be part of Pakistan, even at the expense of undoing the partition arrangement.

In fact, the Maharaja of Kashmir, Hari Singh wanted to stay independent after the British quitted. But tribals and the irregular Pakistani forces (the regular ones also) marched from the Pakistan

wrong in the sense that the state of Jammu and Kashmir enjoys autonomy as enunciated in Article 370 which says that except the three subjects—foreign affairs, defence and communications—the other articles of the constitution that gave powers to the Central Government would not be applied to Jammu and Kashmir. The exception would be made only with the concurrence of the state's assembly.

In other words, because of these constitutional provisions, the State of Jammu and Kashmir enjoyed the type of autonomy which other states do not have. Subsequently, the Sheikh Sahib had the state constituent assembly pass a resolution that the state of Jammu and

Republic.

With the passage of time, the Sheikh became the only liberal voice which could be heard clearly in the midst of challenges and counter-challenges by Hindus and Muslims. I recall when I was released from the Tihar Jail during the emergency my co-prisoners asked me to visit Srinagar and request the Sheikh to speak against the emergency because he was respected all over the country. He had no hesitation in issuing a statement that the emergency had over stayed and should be withdrawn.

I wish Farooq had imbibed the qualities of Sheikh Sahib and guided New Delhi instead of flirting with the

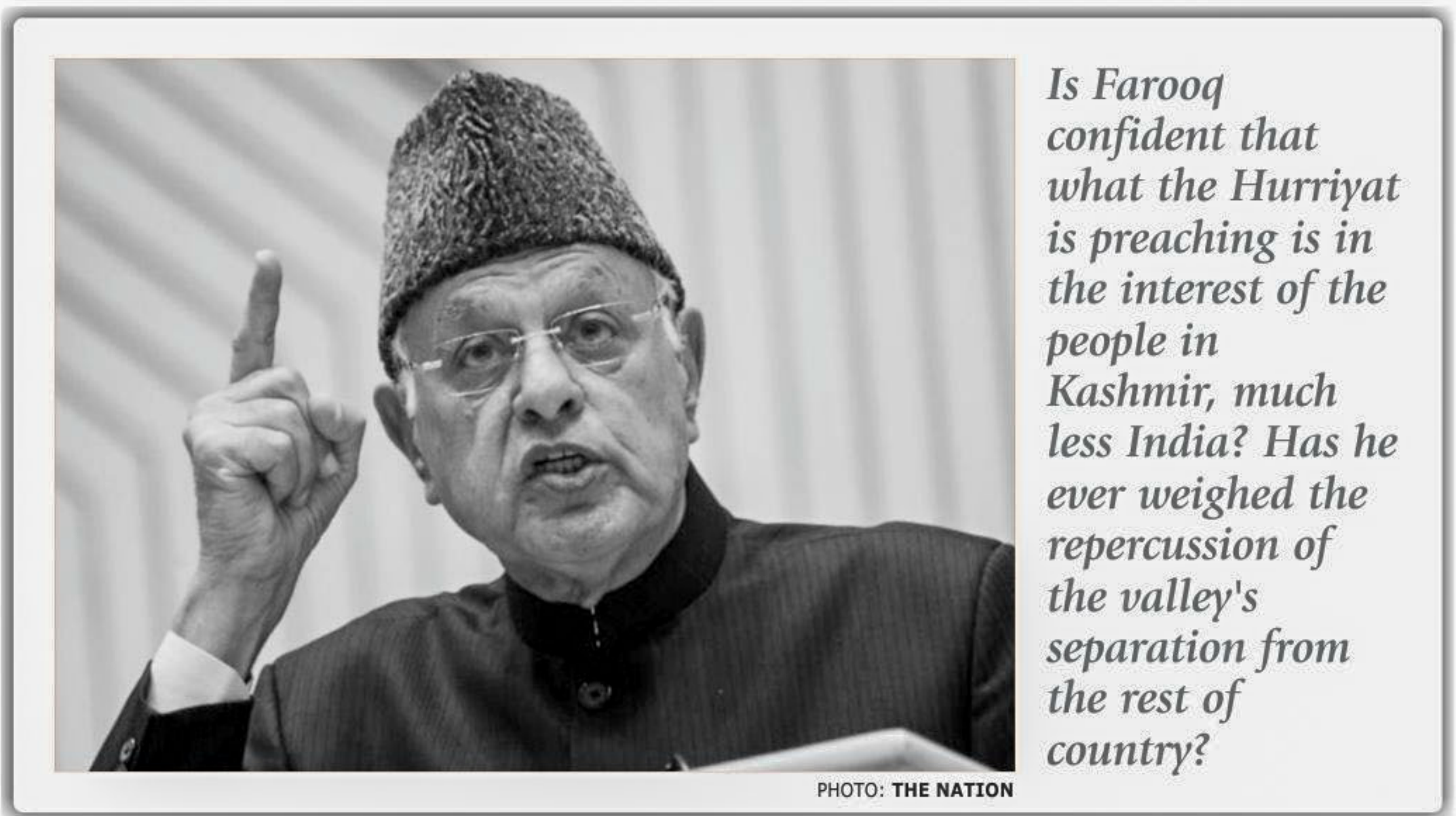


PHOTO: THE NATION

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occupied Kashmir to Srinagar. They would have captured it if they had not stopped at Baramula to loot and plunder.

At that time, Farooq Abdullah's father, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, released from the jail on the insistence of then India's Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, organised the people's militia during the Maharaja regime and stalled the forces marching towards Srinagar till regular Indian forces landed at the airport to push back the invaders to the territory, what is now known as PoK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir).

Those who are saying all the time that Kashmir is an integral part of India are

Kashmir had acceded to India irrevocably. Before doing so, he sent Sadiq Sahib, who became the state chief minister later, to Pakistan to assess what kind of polity Islamabad was going to pursue.

After hearing Sadiq's view that Pakistan wanted to be an Islamic state, the Sheikh Sahib, a product of people's struggle to obtain independence from the Maharaja and the British, took no time in joining India because he wanted the state to be pluralistic. A democratic India, where there would be religious freedom, was the obvious choice for him because Pakistan wanted to be an Islamic

separatists to harm India's cause. He is acceptable throughout the country even though he is found whimsical. He should think twice before he gives even indirect help to separatists. By announcing his support for the Hurriyat he has raised many questions in the minds of people, both in Kashmir and the rest of India.

Farooq should realise that his constituency is the entire country. When he says anything which tells upon on India's unity he confuses people because they see him on the side of India's integrity, not its dismemberment.

The writer is an eminent Indian columnist.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Expectations from PM's India visit

The Prime Minister is likely to travel to India on 18 December for a trip expected to benefit both the neighbouring countries. Among the several bilateral instruments awaiting agreement, such as peaceful use of nuclear energy, trade, commerce, border security, river basin management and other issues of mutual interest, we hope that the vital issue of Teesta river water sharing will be prioritised and solved.

Another important issue is border security management - Bangladeshi citizens are being killed frequently by the Indian Security Force near the border, which must be systematically solved immediately. Proper river basin management between the two countries should be given importance as well, and specific trade and investment policies should be undertaken. Finally, the movement of drugs, alcoholic substances, and detained terrorists through the border should be effectively tackled through this visit.

May our amiable relationship with India be transferred into strong diplomatic and participatory ties through this historic visit.

Shaker Riaz
University of Dhaka