

## BJP's massive victory in UP

### What does it bode for Bangladesh and the region?

IT is no mean achievement to gain nearly seven times the seat than the previous parliamentary tally. And if it is indeed a tectonic shift in Indian politics as one senior BJP leader has said, it is fair to ask as to what the massive BJP victory implies for Bangladesh and for the region of South Asia as a whole. There are two issues that order our thoughts.

Firstly, now that the victory further strengthens the BJP's stronghold on all-India politics, it being in control of more than a third of the Union's 29 States, either singly or in coalition with a regional party, we in Bangladesh would hope, given the very good relations the Modi government has with Bangladesh, that the BJP would use this strength to resolve the bilateral issues, particularly the longstanding ones like sharing of the Teesta waters, by putting pressure on Mamata Banerjee to come on board.

Secondly, and equally importantly, is the implication of the victory and the underlying political philosophy of the BJP. Admittedly, the Modi victory in 2014 rode on the crest of Hindutva wave but he had assuaged our fears by retaining the visage of Indian secularism to a great extent. However, given that about 54 percent of the population and 64 percent of the land is under rule of the saffron and BJP and its allies at this point in time, and the fact that some BJP leaders term the UP victory as a mandate for Hindu raj, we wonder whether Prime Minister Modi, under the circumstances, would be able to maintain the secular edifice of India.

Such waves, unfortunately are not restricted by geographical boundaries and tend to spill over, the rightist and extremist in this country ever ready to exploit that situation. And that might render the job of Prime Minister Hasina, who is striving very hard to make Bangladesh a secular and pluralistic country, far more difficult. And this is what make us feel very uneasy.

## Question paper leaks

### Take steps to stop it for good

THE Education Minister on Friday blamed a section of teachers for the question paper leaks that have continually plagued our education system. According to him, questions are leaked and shared on social media right after they are handed over to teachers on exam day.

Because of leaks, meritorious students, who do not want to have anything to do with leaked question papers have seriously lost out, over the years, to others who do, compromising the accreditation value of the country's educational institutions and examinations.

As questions are leaked, instead of studying, some students may simply wait to get their hands on leaked questions. This seriously undermines the spirit of fairness and encourages students to commit corrupt practices at a very young age. Is it then difficult to understand why corruption is so widespread in all sectors of the society? Having known the severity of the costs, why have the authorities not taken fool proof steps to end this?

Whatever the reasons are, they are clearly unacceptable. The authorities, instead of placing the blame here and there, must take responsibility and formulate a comprehensive strategy to bring an end to this odious practice. This should include holding those involved accountable, regardless of who they are, and making examples of them.

# Farakka Barrage is hurting Bangladesh and India



NAZRUL ISLAM

THE demand to decommission and demolish the Farakka barrage is getting louder in India. Among the politicians, Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of Bihar, has been making the above demand for quite some time. He had raised this demand formally with the Indian central government, meeting with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on August 12, 2016. He has raised the demand again on February 20, 2017.

Many prominent Indian river experts have now joined Nitish Kumar. Among them is the Magsaysay award winner Rajendra Singh, also known as Waterman, who said in the international seminar on "Incessant Ganga", organised

Indian experts and policymakers. In raising the demand for demolition of Farakka, they are motivated by the damage it has done and is doing to India itself. It has been reported that about 328 million tons of sediment – about 40 percent of the current sediment volume of the river – is getting trapped behind the Farakka barrage and deposited in the upstream riverbed. As a result, the riverbed has risen in elevation, aggravating floods. The barrage has also triggered the funnelling process, as a result of which upstream riverbank erosion has worsened. It has been reported that more than 3,000 hectares of land has been lost to river erosion in the Murshidabad and Maldaha districts of West Bengal alone. The extent of erosion in Bihar is reported to be greater.

Meanwhile, the Farakka barrage has failed to live up to its professed goals. It failed to desilt the Kolkata port to the extent that it could continue to be a sea

southwest Bangladesh, harming the ecology and economy of the entire region. By reducing flow of fresh water and aggravating salinity ingress, Farakka has harmed the health of the Sundarbans. Farakka has been damaging for the ecology of northwest Bangladesh too, as it cut off the flow into the Baral River – the main river of the Chalan Beel area, extending over several districts of the region. Farakka has been the main reason for the drastic drop of the sediment carried by the rivers to the Bay of Bengal from an annual about two billion tonnes to only about one billion. As a result, the coastal land elevation and normal delta formation processes have been thwarted to a significant extent, making Bangladesh more vulnerable to the sea level rise caused by global warming.

In view of the above, Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN), Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA)

interventions in rivers in general. These interventions, promoted by a commercial approach to rivers, ultimately prove to be counter-productive.

It is important in this regard for Bangladesh to sign and ratify without any further delay the 1997 UN Convention on Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which can provide a legal basis for Bangladesh's demand. This convention upholds the lower riparian countries' right to historical and customary use of river flows and prohibits upper riparian countries from construction of river intervening structures without the consent of lower riparian countries.

It is also important for Bangladesh to take lessons from the Farakka experience in deciding about the proposed Ganges barrage to be built inside Bangladesh. Like Farakka, this barrage, if built, will cause upstream riverbed aggradation, leading to increased flooding and riverbank erosion. There is no doubt that flows of the rivers of southeast Bangladesh need to be increased. However, the real solution to this problem lies in the demolition of Farakka and other diversionary barrages, so that the full natural flow of the Ganges can be restored. This, in turn, will restore the flows of the rivers of southeast Bangladesh.

The growing demand inside India for the demolition of the Farakka barrage signifies a paradigm shift in the Indo-Bangladesh negotiations regarding common rivers. It proves the futility of the commercial approach to rivers and the desirability of an ecological approach, which advocates for restoration of the natural flows of rivers. Bangladesh needs to take note of this paradigm shift, adopt the principled position of ecological approach to rivers, sign the 1997 UN convention, and ask the Indian government to remove the Farakka and other river diversionary barrages. This should be the main water-related agenda in PM Sheikh Hasina's upcoming meeting with the Indian PM. Merely focusing on the arithmetic of the dwindling Teesta flow will not help, because unless the root problem is addressed, pretty soon there may be no water left in the river for Bangladesh to share! [For details regarding the harmful consequences of the commercial approach to rivers and benefits of an ecological approach, see the author's newly published book, *Let the Delta Be a Delta – The Way to Protect Bangladesh Rivers* (Eastern Academic, 2016)]

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PHOTO: STAR

by Bihar's water resources department in Patna in February, 2017, "Farakka is inauspicious (*ashubh*) for Bihar. It is a curse (*abhishap*) which needs to be removed, because unless and until we remove it, we cannot move forward" (*The Hindu*, February 27, 2017)." In the same seminar, Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of South Asia Network on Dams, River and People, New Delhi, urged for an urgent review of the Farakka barrage, which, in his view, had failed to fulfil any of the purpose – irrigation, hydro-electric power, water supply – of the barrage for which it was built (*The Hindu*, February 27, 2017).

Of course, the Indian politicians and river experts are demanding demolition of Farakka not out of any concerns for Bangladesh. Unfortunately, consequences for Bangladesh, of river intervening structures built by India, do not figure highly in the considerations of

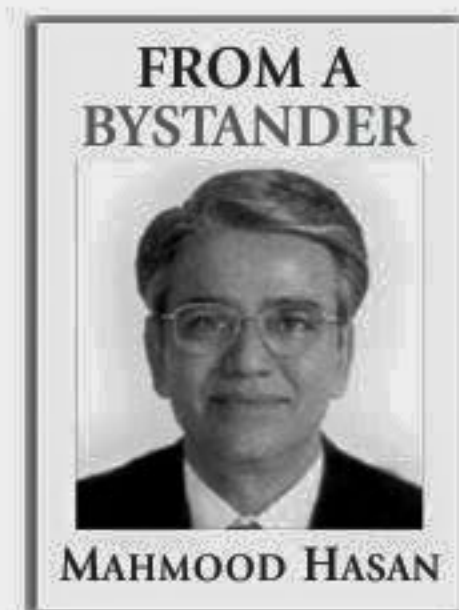
port. The fate of Kolkata as a sea port was actually sealed by the fact that it is located about 100 miles inland along a shallow, winding river. This was alright when Kolkata was chosen by the British East India Company as a port in the 17th century when ships had sails and shallow drafts. However, it was simply impossible for Kolkata to continue as a sea port in the age of super tankers and container carrying mega-sized ships. Farakka did augment the flow of the Bhagirathi-Hoogly channel. However, it is difficult to see what tangible, significant benefits this brought to an area that had already adjusted over several centuries to the eastward shift of the main flow of the Ganges toward Bangladesh and away from the Bhagirathi-Hoogly channel.

By contrast, the damage done to Bangladesh by Farakka is simply huge. It has dried up most of the rivers of

and many other organisations in the country have been calling for the demolition of the Farakka barrage for a long time now. In recent years, they made this demand very forcefully in the presence of top Indian water experts and policymakers during the International Conference on Regional Cooperation on Transboundary Rivers (ICRCTR) held in Dhaka in 2004.

In this backdrop, it is heartening to see that Indian politicians and river experts themselves are now asking for the demolition of the Farakka barrage. The government of Bangladesh should formally raise the demand for demolition with the Indian government. In fact, it should also ask for the demolition of the Gajoldoba barrage and other river intervening and diversionary structures. The failure of Farakka is an example of the inappropriateness of structural

## Interesting race for the Elysée Palace



FROM A BYSTANDER

MAHMOOD HASAN

FRANCE goes to polls to elect a new president on April 23, 2017, at a time when the electorate is deeply worried about the political direction of the country. Several issues under the current socialist government of Francois Hollande – economic problems related to working hours and social benefits; influence of Brexit on the European Union; the election of Donald Trump; rise of terrorist attacks; social instability created by Muslim refugees; and debates about religious freedom and secularism; continuation of emergency, etc – have raised apprehensions among people.

French law requires candidates to secure 500 signatures from national or local elected officials from at least 30 different districts to run for presidency. The signature collection process will end on March 17, 2017, when the final list of candidates will be officially published. Currently there are several unofficial candidates, the four prominent are – Benoit Hamon (Socialist), Francois Fillon (Les Republicains), Emmanuel Macron (Independent), and the redoubtable Marine Le Pen (Front National).

The Socialist Party is in a pretty bad shape. President Francois Hollande has not been popular and recognising his low polls rating, has decided not to seek a second term. Many expected that former Prime Minister Manuel Valls would get the party nomination. But he lost to the leftist rebel, former education minister Benoit Hamon. Hamon, not very popular amongst the leftists, has made some unrealistic campaign promises, such as reducing working hours from 35 to 32 hours per week and providing monthly basic income for all. He is likely to be eliminated in the first round, according to some opinion polls.

Seeing Marine Le Pen's popularity, Hollande has vowed that he will "do everything" to prevent her from being

elected president. The interesting twist is Hollande can still run for the second term and has secretly kept his 500 votes just in case he decides by March 17 to replace Hamon.

Francois Fillon, former Prime Minister under Nicolas Sarkozy, entered the race with lots of promises. Unfortunately, he is now under dark clouds as the French satirical magazine *Le Canard Enchaîné* revealed in January 2017 that when he was Prime Minister, he illegally paid his British wife half a million Euros for being his parliamentary assistant, a post which never existed. Fillon did not deny the allegation and said that the payment was 'perfectly justified'. French investigators are now investigating the case, while no formal charges have been made so far. Though Fillon has been claiming he is victim of an "institutional coup d'etat", his polls rating has plummeted. The allegation has demoralised his supporters and many have deserted him.

To keep party unity, activists demanded that Fillon step aside and let veteran conservative Alain Juppé run for the presidency. But Alain Juppé, Prime Minister under Jacques Chirac, lost to Fillon in the Republican Party primary in November 2016. In a firm statement on March 6, 2017, Juppé announced that he would not stand in for Fillon. Unless legal charges pull Fillon down, he will remain in the race. As criticisms against Fillon continues to mount and with prospect of criminal charges against him, the infighting within the Republican Party is evident. As of now, Fillon's chance of making it to the Elysée Palace appears remote, according to polls.

Emmanuel Macron, Hollande's Minister for Economy, resigned in August 2016 to form his own movement known as "En Marche" (on the move) – not a party. He fancies himself as an outsider like Donald Trump and rejects the political system and calls for "democratic revolution" and "structural reforms" without elaborating on them. However, the disarray within the Republican Party has made Macron's prospects brighter. His polls rating is relatively high and he may end up reaching the second round.

The most talked about candidate this time around is the extreme-right Front National leader Marine Le Pen. She is a member of the European Parliament and contested the French presidential election in 2012, when she was placed third with 17.9 percent votes behind Francois Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy. Marine Le Pen took over the party from her father in 2011, softened the party's racist image and expelled her father from the party in 2015. Le Pen has promised to take France out of the EU, replace Euro with French Franc, and vowed to bring back jobs, growth and prosperity.

usually been a two-horse race between the Socialists and Republicans. But this time it may be different. The high drama involving the main candidates will be clear after March 17. The two-round system in French voting was introduced to weed out stragglers. The second round will be held on May 7, 2017. Soon after the presidential election, France will also elect 577 members of the National Assembly on June 11 and 18, 2017. The question is will the new President get the support of the majority party in the National Assembly?

France is a rich industrial democracy



Marine Le Pen, leader of France's far-right National Front party, is a frontrunner in the French presidential race.

PHOTO: CHARLY TRIBALLEAU/AFP

Though her popularity rating is high, all is not well with Marine Le Pen. She has been suspected of illegal party financing and fake jobs for two of her assistants in the European Parliament. The European Parliament lifted her immunity from French prosecution for sending tweets in December 2015, which displayed images of killings by ISIS militants. French law prohibits the distribution of violent images or incitement of terrorism.

French presidential elections have

in troubled Europe. Analysts say that this pivotal election will not only decide the future of France but also of Europe. The architect of the Fifth French Republic Charles de Gaulle once famously said, "How can anyone govern a nation that has more than 300 different kinds of cheese?" Let us hope that France does not go down the populist path and wreck the European Union, but rather sticks to mainstream consensus politics.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### MRP passport validity should be raised to 10 years

The analog passports used to be valid for five years and were entitled to one extension of validity for another five years. However, the new MRP passports are also valid for five years but are not subject to renewal. This is okay for people who fly frequently and use up all the pages within five years; but what about the majority of the people who don't fly very often? The unused pages just go to waste as the new passports cannot be renewed. If MRP passports' validity is increased to 10 years, I believe these passports can be used more effectively and efficiently with minimum waste.

Aminur Rahim  
By email

### Need for student elections

Students are the future leaders of the country. If led properly, they have the strength, ability and courage to face the problems of the country. This guidance comes in the form of student councils in schools and universities, which trains them in leadership and social service activities. Elections of student councils in colleges and universities have not been held for more than twenty five years. Recently our honourable President has also mentioned the importance of the election of DUCSU for the development of democracy in our country. We hope that our government and the authorities of colleges and universities will take necessary steps to hold these elections all over the country. These elections should be free, fair and peaceful so that students can choose their leaders democratically, and thus also learn democracy.

Biplob, Faridpur