

Double victimisation of a rape survivor!

Police must heed her allegations

THERE cannot be a more distressing situation than a rape victim finding herself in a situation of double jeopardy, being wronged twice. It is even more disturbing to see that one of the sources of her agony is the very agency that is supposed to provide her legal succour. The victim had to lodge a court case directly because the police had refused to register the case when she went to lodge a FIR with the Bochaganj PS of Dinajpur, more than a year and a half ago.

The irony is that the victim's brother has now been put behind bars on the trumped-up charge of raping her. And all this because the victim had resisted continual pressure from the police to withdraw the case since the very beginning.

The actions of the police in this matter, we are constrained to say, are not only despicable but are likely to damage the reputation of the whole institution, which is under criticism for several such instances. But this has, perhaps, surpassed all the other cases of police harassment, victimisation of the helpless and corruption. And this contrasts with the claim of the home minister that the police are now a more people-friendly force.

However, we are heartened by the new IGP's assurance that the force would be made people-friendly and all the lacunae would be removed. That we believe is a gradual process, and we look forward to the changes being effected. But we would request the inspector general, given the gravity of the matter, to investigate this particular case of serious transgressions of law and dereliction of duty by the errant police officers, and set an example. Words must be translated into demonstrated actions, and in this particular case, what action the police authorities take would be a matter of public scrutiny.

Santals' demand for Roman script

Take appropriate measures to fulfil it

PERHAPS no other nation can claim to have sacrificed so much as the Bangladeshis, who sacrificed their lives for their mother language. Their struggles and sacrifices have inspired people worldwide, and today the International Mother Language Day stands as a reminder of the importance of fighting for everyone's right to her or his language. Thus the Santals' demand, coming as it does in the month of February, that their pre-primary textbooks be written in Roman alphabet deserves serious attention, partly because of that legacy, but also because it is their right to choose the kind of alphabet/ script they want to practice, nurture and nourish their mother language in.

The government has already taken some laudable steps about the ethnic minority languages, including introducing pre-primary textbooks in five indigenous languages at the beginning of last year through the The International Mother Language Institute (IMLI). But the Santals' protests show more needs to be done. They are worried that their children are not being able to learn their mother language in the script of their preference—the Roman script. We hope the government will take appropriate steps to put these concerns to rest. The IMLI should remove impediments, if any, in preparing the Roman script for the Santals quickly.

Here is a real opportunity for Bangladesh to show the world that diverse languages and cultures can co-exist harmoniously in this country, and that those are cultivated and promoted in equal measure.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Dhaka's housing problem

The Star Weekend published an article titled "Tenants: At the mercy of landlords" on January 26. Every year many students and jobseekers from rural areas go to Dhaka to explore their opportunities. But Dhaka's house rent, which has only been skyrocketing over the years, is a massive problem. Moreover, some groups of people such as students, bachelors and working women are turned away by homeowners driven by greed and prejudice.

I would like to urge the government to set up a regulatory body to oversee the arbitrary increase of house rent every year and enact a law to declare that discrimination based on religion, gender and ethnicity is illegal.

Mohib Billah, By email



PHOTO: STAR



SELIM RAIHAN

THE concept of South Asia as a region is largely inherited from the British colonial legacy, with some exceptions. The year of 1947 and subsequently the year of 1971 saw

the breaking down of the common integrated landmass of the Indian sub-continent into several pieces. The initiative for an integrated South Asia only started in the early 1980s with the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. Since then there have been initiatives like the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) in 1993 and the agreement on South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2006 to boost the regional integration process in South Asia.

Results of these initiatives, however, have remained largely unsatisfactory. Furthermore, with enhanced and persistent political conflicts between two major countries, i.e. India and Pakistan, there are now questions about whether South Asia can sustain as an integrated region in the future.

Yet, an integrated South Asia is important for many reasons. The region has a shared history, shared culture, and hundreds of years of a common civilisation which ran through different corners of this region. There is also convincing evidence that deeper integration is needed for generating and sustaining economic growth in a region that is home to a significant share, and the highest density, of poor people in the

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BETWEEN THE LINES



KULDIP NAYAR

ITS understandable that this year's budget should have an eye on rural India which constitutes some 70 percent of voters. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley had no compunction in mixing politics with economics. In the past whenever the budget was mixed with election, political parties would protest against such a practice.

Over the years, economics has gotten mixed with politics. And, unfortunately, there is no go from this. The emphasis of this is on bettering the lot of those living in villages, the rural poor. The drubbing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Rajasthan by-polls shows that. In all the three by-elections, including one for the Lok Sabha, the Congress has won. Whether the party would continue to draw the same results is yet to be seen. But the climate is pro-Congress.

A sort of pattern has come to emerge. Where the Congress is in power, the BJP has won and it is the other way around in the BJP-ruled states. The voters have no choice except choosing between the two parties. The third front has sought to be created but it is confined to some states alone. The front does not seem to go across the country.

In fact, the third front is reduced to the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the Janata United of Nitish Kumar in Bihar and the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Lalu Prasad, however limited in sway in the state. The Congress which is spread all over the country has only one opponent: the BJP.

This is a strange phenomenon in a secular India because the credentials of BJP are too well known. A soft Hindutva has come to engulf the country. This looks odd in India where the constitution uses the word "secular" in its preamble. One may blame Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, for dividing the country into two nations. But the resistance from the people was minimal.

Not long ago when I discussed the subject with Lord Mountbatten, the last

The missing link

What's holding back greater regional integration in South Asia?

world. Deeper regional integration through trade in goods and services and better transport facilities will improve the competitiveness of these countries to better participate in global trade. Promotion of a regional supply chain will be crucial in developing dynamic comparative advantages of these countries. Finally, "peace dividends", through intra-country stable political relations, will be immensely high.

The aforementioned scenarios call for a deeper investigation into the causes behind the unsatisfactory progress of the integration process in South Asia. The most cited, and of course very important, factors in the "conventional" discourse are ineffective tariff liberalisation due to the presence of long sensitive lists in the FTA, non-tariff barriers, lack of trade facilitation, and lack of political will.

In this article, we explore three other factors which have not been discussed much in the regular discourse on

respectively. The two other big countries in South Asia are Pakistan and Bangladesh with shares in regional GDP of only 7.6 percent and 5.6 percent respectively. In contrast, among the ten ASEAN countries, Indonesia has the largest share of around 40 percent in all three cases (land, population, and GDP).

However, with respect to the share in GDP, there are also five other major countries in ASEAN, namely Thailand (15.4 percent), Malaysia (13 percent), Singapore (11.1 percent), Philippines (10.7 percent), and Vietnam (6.2 percent). In NAFTA, among the three countries, the US has the largest share in land (45.3 percent), population (66.4 percent) and GDP (84.7 percent). In the case of EU, in terms of the share in regional GDP, the leading countries are Germany (20.7 percent), France (15.4 percent) and the UK (15 percent).

This implies that the size-imbalance factor is something unique in South Asia (though NAFTA can be a similar



regional integration process in South Asia. These are "size-imbalance", "start-up stage" and "convergence of development process". Here we argue that while tariff and non-tariff barriers, lack of trade facilitation and political will have their usual restraining effects, the aforementioned three other factors may qualify to be quite fundamental in understanding the unsatisfactory outcomes of the regional integration process in South Asia. For our analysis, we make comparisons among SAARC, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), EU (European Union) and some African regional trading blocs.

The "size-imbalance" factor relates to the gigantic dominance of India in South Asia. The shares of India in the total land area, population and real GDP of South Asia in 2016 are 62 percent, 75 percent, and 83 percent

case), and it is a structural factor which is something given and very little can be done to counter it. However, this also highlights the fact that, in contrast to the leadership experience in any other comparable regional blocs (i.e. Indonesia in ASEAN and Germany in EU), there is a much more critical importance of India's leadership role in South Asia in taking the regional integration agenda forward.

The "start-up stage" factor relates to the stage of the level of development of the region, in terms of the average per capita GDP of the region, when the process of integration gets started. Interestingly, the South Asian regional integration process started at a much lower level of per capita GDP. For comparison, we consider 1992/1993 as the base year when ASEAN FTA was signed and when SAPTA was signed too. In 1993, in ASEAN, intra-regional trade

was 19 percent, which increased to 24 percent in 2016. In contrast, in SAARC, in 1993, intra-regional trade was only three percent, which increased to 5.5 percent in 2016. In 1993, SAARC had the average per capita GDP of USD 869, in contrast to ASEAN's average per capita GDP of USD 7,645. If we exclude the outliers in both regions (Brunei and Singapore in ASEAN and Maldives in SAARC), then in 1993, those averages would be USD 730 for SAARC and USD 1,700 for ASEAN.

There is no denying that both NAFTA and EU started their regional integration process at much higher average levels of per capita GDPs than that of SAARC. Until recently, SAARC hosted five LDCs (now four as the Maldives graduated from the LDC status in 2011) out of eight members. Therefore, looking at the per capita GDP differentials, one may argue that the "pull factor" for regional integration is rather weak in South Asia. Most of the African regional trading blocs also have a similar "start-up stage" problem, and their regional integration processes also have been unsatisfactory as we observe in SAARC. All these issues indicate that there is a need for considerable "unorthodox" efforts for energising the regional integration process in South Asia, which should involve a much greater emphasis on intra-regional services and investment integrations.

Finally, the "convergence of development process" factor relates to the importance of the convergence of domestic development policies in the member countries for an effective regional integration process. In ASEAN, for decades, most of the member countries have been converging with respect to their domestic development policies related to trade openness, foreign investment, macroeconomic management and social policies, which has led to the search for a "Southeast Asian development model" in the development economics discourse.

In contrast, in South Asia, such convergence is very weak, and, therefore, there is no such "South Asian development model". This weak convergence of domestic development policies of the member countries in South Asia is a major restraining factor for a deeper integration. Therefore, to energise and sustain South Asia's regional integration process, it is very important that the member countries get their domestic policies "right".

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The economics of politics

Viceroy of India, he blamed Jinnah for the partition. He said that the then Prime Minister Clement Richard Attlee was keen on having some sort of unity between India and Pakistan. Lord Mountbatten told me so when I met him after many years.

He said he had invited Mahatma Gandhi first to have a look at the partition formula. The Mahatma walked out of Mountbatten's room when he heard the word partition. Jinnah welcomed the partition when Mountbatten asked him if he would have some connection with India—he categorically said no, adding "I don't trust them." That ended the dream of a united India which Attlee wanted.

To envisage a budget for united India is a difficult proposition. No party,

parliamentary constituency. It would mean the country would have approximately 180 medical colleges and as many hospitals available to them.

To make it a successful proposition, the centre is expected to involve state-run hospitals in a big way for smooth takeoff of the scheme. This is the third major insurance programme of the NDA government after the prime minister's Fasal Bima Yojana for farmers and the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana. The crop insurance scheme launched by the government a couple of years ago has turned out to be a success with business growing to around Rs 25,000 crore.

The tragedy is that Muslims have withdrawn instead of confronting Hindutva with all their force. When I

tally in the state, although with the help of a few like-minded parties.

This must have come as a big jolt to the BJP, particularly Prime Minister Modi and party president Amit Shah. They had taken Gujarat for granted. The Congress is jubilant because it has bearded the lion in its own den. Whether the party can keep the winning trend in the future is difficult to say, but the Maha Front which Nitish Kumar is trying to build with all non-BJP parties may challenge Modi at the centre.

One drawback, however, is that Nitish Kumar is siding with the BJP to save his government in the state after fissures began appearing in Rashtriya Janata Dal of Lalu Prasad Yadav and his own party. Of course, Lalu is still popular and draws support from even unexpected quarters.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (left) and BJP President Amit Shah. The climate seems to be pro-Congress especially after BFP's defeat in the by-polls in Rajasthan where the BJP is in power.

PHOTO: REUTERS

except the Congress, has its presence in all the states. And the Congress itself is losing its hold state after state. The BJP is slowly filling the vacuum, but on communal lines. Its pronounced tilt towards Hindutva means that the budget would have 80 percent of benefits for Hindus.

Under these circumstances, the 'Modicare' which assures health insurance to 50 crore individuals with coverage of up to Rs 5 lakh per family per year appears to be a masterstroke. Describing the scheme as "the world's largest state-funded healthcare programme" the finance minister also announced one medical college in every

asked a top Muslim leader the reason for such a move, he said: "We want safety of our lives and properties. We are not interested in fighting the Hindutva forces." Thus, the BJP is capturing the imagination of the Hindu population.

This means that Prime Minister Narendra Modi could win the next general election. It would be his personal victory and not that of the BJP. He has cast his spell over the Hindu voters, particularly in rural India. Some respite is on the horizon. The assembly election in Gujarat, Modi's stronghold, has shown lessening of BJP's strength because the Congress has increased its

He has been imprisoned and lodged in Ranchi jail after he was found guilty in the fodder scam. Yet, he seems to command support from the voters. And Nitish is conscious of it.

Prime Minister Modi is not yet bothered about a fraction of his support going away because he still commands influence over the voters. But the real picture would emerge only after the results of the state elections this year. Whether Modi goes for an early poll next year is in the realm of conjecture. At present any guess would be a shot in the dark.

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