

The grim underbelly of labour migration

Govt must address problems facing expat workers

REMITTANCE inflow is a major contributor to our economy, yet the plight of those whose backbreaking labour keeps the money flowing in remains largely overlooked. A recent report by *The Daily Star* has highlighted this contrast between expectations and the actual experience of migrant workers, which brings forth a troubling question: at what cost are they doing what they are doing? The report, citing experts, presents grim statistics and accounts of exploitations and corruption that bedevil the labour migration sector. It appears that a large number of expatriate workers, who collectively sent home around USD 15 billion in the last fiscal year, were left poorer and more vulnerable upon migration.

A migrant worker or overseas jobseeker has to face myriad problems in their bid to give their family a better life. A 2017 study found that 19 percent of overseas jobseekers are defrauded in Bangladesh and cannot go abroad despite paying money to the middlemen. And 32 percent of migrants face various forms of exploitation—joblessness, irregular wages, non-payment of wages, etc. Many of them return home within several months of their travel, even after having sold off ancestral land, braved perilous journeys, and subjected themselves to the mercy of manpower brokers and trafficking gangs. All these, clearly, stand in stark contrast to the political rhetoric surrounding remittances being the second largest source of foreign exchange for the country.

A lot of the problems facing migrants are due to lack of discipline and accountability in the chaotic labour migration sector. So, any effort to address their plight has to begin by first establishing order in the sector. The government must adopt a zero-tolerance approach to corruption, rein in the disruptive influences of recruiting agencies and their collaborators, both local and international, and reform its labour policy and practices keeping the best interests of migrants in mind, including generating local employment for aspirant migrants. The government cannot turn a blind eye to the sufferings of the expatriate workforce while continuing to be a beneficiary of their hard work and sacrifices.

Rickshaw pullers' woes

They remain a neglected lot

THEY come handy to 60 percent of city dwellers of the capital by providing a relatively cheap mode of transport. Admittedly, they are the main cause of traffic gridlock in Dhaka and there is a huge gap in the official number of licensed rickshaws, a hundred thousand, and the actual estimated figure, which is nearly ten times that.

Perhaps it may be a good time to consider restricting their number in the city. But that would not be possible unless the syndicate that issues fake license plates, reportedly costing Tk 15,000 each and renewed every three months at a high fee, is busted. There is a need to find out if there is a nexus between the syndicate and the municipal authorities that make this possible. This practice has been going on since the municipal authorities stopped issuing license from the 1980s. While there are compelling grounds for limiting the number of rickshaws, the authorities need to consider the fate of the nearly one and a half million rickshaw-pullers and the sustenance of their dependents should that happen. The government should consider providing alternative sources of income for those rickshaw-pullers who would find themselves without a source of income.

While that is one aspect of the issue, the other aspect is the interest of a community that is entirely at the mercy of almost everyone, harassment from the police being the major peril they face every moment and of the owners and the passengers. In this regard, suggestions of the speakers at a roundtable, organised to deliberate on a study by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies on the state of rickshaw-pullers in Dhaka city, merit due consideration. One of the suggestions was to bring them under social safety net programme besides giving them proper training and catering for their housing and rehabilitation. It is also worth considering whether the current rickshaws could be modified to require less human power to be driven, thereby mitigating its physical impact on the puller.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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BSTI cannot avoid responsibility

It's shocking that two important organisations would reach contradictory conclusions about the quality of a food item as essential as milk. In the first instance, researchers from Dhaka University made a shocking revelation that they found traces of detergent and antibiotics in packaged milk. Conversely, a recent report submitted to the High Court by Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI) said its tests did not detect any harmful substance in pasteurised milk of 14 brands. Such contradictory findings only serve to undermine confidence in public institutions and create confusion in the minds of consumers.

The BSTI seems to be in reverse gear after it had released another report, less than two months ago, that found 52 food items out of 406 in 27 categories to be substandard. One wonders if the backlash that the first report had generated has something to do with its see-no-evil-hear-no-evil approach in the most recent instance. The BSTI should understand that consumers depend on it to know which food is safe for them and which is not. It affects their food choices and is critical to their health and wellbeing. I urge the government to take necessary steps in this regard as soon as possible.

Akash Hossen, Gangni, Meherpur



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

THERE is a telling anecdote about how Mashrafe Mortaza, Bangladesh's talismanic ODI captain, developed his skills as a fast bowler. He was not a kid lucky enough to go to some

fancy-pants sports training academy to hone his skills. Mortaza once recounted that he strengthened his neck muscles in his teenage years by swimming in the river with his little nephew's legs wrapped around his neck.

This, in a nutshell, gives you a sense of the truly diverse, grassroots background of many of Bangladesh's celebrated cricketers. There are many things to be proud of about Bangladesh's cricket, but for me, this is the most important.

Bangladesh cricket is a wondrous exception in a country where all benefits disproportionately go to the elite in Dhaka, mostly to the uber-wealthy (a Swiss diplomat in Dhaka once quipped about the "people's republic of Gulshan"). This is not, alas, something peculiar to Bangladesh. In the United States, where I live, things are possibly worse. Once education was considered here to be a pathway to social mobility. Today, you can predict SAT scores, a critical tool for getting in top universities, by ZIP codes of residents. Welcome to the land of economic apartheid.

Anyway, back to Bangladesh cricket. I'm old enough to remember when cricket used to be a gentleman's game in Bangladesh, and not in a good way. Scions of the affluent indulged in it, because who else could afford the exorbitant price of gear? Performance was pallid. Way back in the Pakistan era, erstwhile East Pakistani presence was virtually nonexistent.

Yet how it has all changed in front of our very eyes! Take our biggest cricket star over which the international media now swoons. He is not from some tony enclave in Dhaka, but from Magura. Shakib Al Hasan, who is having the run of his life, is from a far-flung part of Bangladesh, as is Mustafizur Rahman, whose bashful smile belies the wit and pace of his bowling.

Unique among the nation's elite institutions, Bangladesh cricket represents the rich, full diversity of this nation of villages, small towns and the megalopolis.

For an expatriate living in the US for three decades, it's not always easy to



Bangladeshi players have consistently given a good account of themselves, in and out of the field. Even when they have lost, they have fought like tigers.

PHOTO: REUTERS

follow the Tigers. Remember when they beat Ricky Ponting's Australia in Cardiff in 2005? In those days, cricket broadcasts in the US were unheard of, and I followed their progress on the Internet on Cricinfo, almost dying with tension as the webpage took forever to load. In 2015, I watched Bangladesh's marvellous defeat of England in Adelaide at the last World Cup with a bunch of Bangladeshi friends. We stayed up all night—and did not regret a moment of it.

This time around, World Cup matches start at 5:30am US time. At work, I have my laptop switched on with streaming broadcast in the back office, and my smartphone loaded with live scores. Co-workers smile indulgently, bemused at this crazy South Asian's obsession with a sport that goes on for hours and hours.

I am impervious to it all. The joy of seeing the Tigers battling it out (it's only an occasional glance during work time this time around) takes precedence over everything else.

So first and foremost, salute to you, dear Tigers, for making all of this happen. I know we fans can be fickle and vicious. A win can make you a hero one day, and then a bad loss can have people baying

for your blood. Handling the pressure and performing consistently is no mean feat—and we thank you all the more for it.

Except for the odd mini-scandal, you have been exemplary in your conduct. Down-to-earth and gracious to a fault, you have been wonderful ambassadors of our country.

Next, salute to the government for providing the infrastructure that has made this possible. We are all too aware of the many failings of our government: the graft, politicisation and mismanagement. Yet this is one area where the government has truly shone. One government venture deserves to be especially commended—the Bangladesh Krira Shikha Protisthan. Many of our top cricketers are the products of this remarkable institution.

The result is a cricket team that looks like Bangladesh, representing its rural hinterland, its regional small towns. Bangladesh has been able to tap a wealth of talent—when you cast a net wide enough to encompass the entire nation, the odds for catching some real talent in some village or small town go up exponentially.

The upshot of all of this has been that Bangladesh is now a global force

in cricket. This was brought home to me while reading the comments section of the BBC Sport website following Bangladesh's defeat of South Africa. Howls of protest from cricket fans from all over the world took the BBC to task for referring to the Tigers win as an upset.

Tigers fans are a class unto themselves. While I'm rather fond of them, I also urge them to get real. Fans sometimes go overboard in their expectations. For all their achievements, there is no gainsaying the fact that the Tigers still have a deficit of skills. The remarkable thing about them is, they still manage to achieve success by leveraging whatever skills they have.

It's too early to tell whether the Tigers will actually go into the semifinals. To me, it does not matter. My admiration and love for them is unconditional. They have won some games and lost others, but they have consistently given a good account of themselves, in and out of the field. Even when they have lost, they have fought like, well, tigers.

To me, that's all that matters.

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Post-election political architecture in India

BADRUL ALAM SIDDIQUI

IT seems that Modi government's success in the current term will depend to a large extent on managing domestic politics more than anything else, including foreign policy. I intend to highlight two key domestic concerns and their political management: negative social dynamics and dissident conflicts. It is expected that paying closer attention to these issues would positively influence the domestic political position of BJP as well as the image of India as a whole. It would protect India's immediate political and security interests, and assuage domestic political tensions by limiting the scope of damage through internal conflict.

Currently, the key domestic issue is the negative social dynamics generated by class, race, and religion in India. The questions over minority rights and security in India remain unresolved. Although BJP has the support of a majority of the electorate, it is not the size of the electorate supporting BJP or Modi which matters, rather the fringe elements that oppose him and his party's political management. To what extent will loss of trust in India's ruling political elite hinder the functioning of the society? How big a threat is the pursuit of self-interest by dominant religious groups and victorious political parties (under the religious pretensions of Hindutva) to India's social fabric? What roles do the minorities, faced with declining compassion and tolerance, play in undermining social relations and institutional systems in India? These must be addressed carefully for India to have a stable and healthy social fabric. For India, success in domestic politics is closely intertwined with concerns of public order and internal security that place more emphasis on freedom of religion and expression.

Fuelling the above is the Maoist build-up, another internal security issue, the fourth-generation war, in which tactics of the minorities confound the majority and the state loses the monopoly of the war. India has been experiencing this for at least a hundred years. Maoists are only one of several insurgent and guerrilla groups. The communist political movement in India started in the 1920s, and the Maoist insurgency has its roots in the Naxalite peasant revolt that took place in 1967. Recent Maoist actions include the murder of an SSB (Sashastra Seema Bal) jawan, five policemen, a young man (by beating), and an off-duty policeman (by stabbing). In response to the Maoist-Naxalite activities, successful state operations include recovery of gelatine sticks, detonators, G3 rifles, and arrest of

couriers of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) party. While many countries face insurgent problem, what is politically worrying in India's case, apart from the sheer violent impact that any insurgent attack leaves behind, is that BJP attributes the creation of Maoist insurgents and the birth of Pakistan to the Indian National Congress (INC), and the secessionist movement in Jammu and Kashmir to the INC and its ally, the NCP (Nationalist Congress Party). The divide between BJP on one hand and the INC and its allies on the other, on such issues, has the potential to create a deep rift in the Indian domestic politics.

During his first term in office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi pursued a somewhat tried and tested way of solving the insurgency in a political way, namely by wooing rebel leaders into politics. It follows not only from the legacy of the

Republic of Colombia, ending more than five decades of a bloody conflict. Although such political management of internal conflict in India has been criticised by some public officials as "an incentive for violence that encourages reward for criminality", pointing towards a virulent saga of Modi, the fact of the matter is that any government facing internal political rifts caused by insurgent violence needs to explore, design, and follow a political architecture that would allow the minority dissident groups to have their stakes in internal politics, as a measure to allay their fears and in recognition of a scope to build on their aspirations. The shortest argument against Modi's critics is that if bullets can be exchanged for ballots as the price for peace, there is no harm in it.

However, for the political management

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PHOTO: REUTERS

internal conflict management strategy in India but also from elsewhere in the world. Laldenga (1986-88) and Zoramthanga (1998-2008), both of whom were in the Mizoram insurgent group, were chief ministers. Several militant leaders such as Usman Abdul Majid, Hakim Mohammad Yasin Shah, Bhaskar Sarma, and Kushal Duwori chose their post-rebellion careers in politics.

On July 21, 2018, eight ex-Colombian rebels were sworn into the Congress of

of Maoists and other dissident groups' activism within a sustained political architecture, the Modis and their opponents should accord singular meaning to fourth-generation war, and come up with unified recommendations in the following days. They must address the root problem of power equation for the dissidents. Conflict management strategies and policies adopted by political parties that overlook and compromise the inherent power equation do not,

and will not, yield any sustained result. Politics, policy and institutionalisation are three strands of political management of insurgent crisis. Without measures to address the cause of violence inherent in power structures, the political architecture will crumble into dust. Addressing the psyche of the minorities based on shared and applied democratic values is essential to create a stable political edifice.

Political efforts and domestic diplomacy such as through replacing bullets with ballots by the BJP government are, no doubt, a good first step towards creating a good foundation for peace. However, no matter how elitist these political efforts and domestic diplomacies may seem, they are only short-term measures, as they may not necessarily embrace all proponents of the causes of dissidence within a group. As such, even if certain persons from the insurgent groups might have preferred ballots over bullets—and these are seen as outreach outcomes by Modi and his people—political parties must use the time gained through this by implanting such measures in institutionalising subsequent measures that would build state capacity for eliminating inequities across the power spectrum so that the voids are filled for the minority dissidents. Prudent political judgement along with actions, which take into account the dangers of the paradoxical nature of power, within this broad set of recommendations will likely seal the penetrative paths of external interference and limit the scope of transborder terrorism for India.

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