

Delhi needs to do more to protect and deepen ties with Dhaka

DEB MUKHARJI

Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister of Bangladesh, made a four-day official visit to India from October 3 to 6. Besides discussions with her Indian counterpart, she also addressed the India Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum. The joint statement issued after the visit contained mutual appreciation for steps taken in various fields and outlines of what is intended in the use of ports and connectivity, water sharing, power, gas, education, culture, and defence. For Bangladesh, the reference to the plight of the "forcibly displaced" persons of Rakhine in Myanmar is a positive development, hopefully undoing the damage done earlier by India's hasty acceptance of Myanmar's version of the developments. If the joint statement lacked the vision of the one issued after Hasina's visit in 2010, it must be recalled that the effort then was to raise the relationship by the bootstraps after a dark period of suspicion and hostility. Today, it has matured greatly and it is possible to undertake projects that underline continuity and interdependence. Hasina has looked forward to a golden period of India-Bangladesh relations.

Going beyond the anodyne which usually permeates high-level joint statements and leaves one in the dark on sensitive issues, on this occasion, there is, on the record, PM Hasina's address to the Indo-Bangladesh Business Forum. Here, she articulated points critical for the future welfare of South Asia. The first of these prescriptions says: "We must move beyond the majority-minority mindset... Pluralism has been the strength. So, we should be able to celebrate South Asia's diversities in religion, ethnicity and language". This may be applicable to all, including elements in her own

country, but cannot but be seen as a veiled admonition to the Indian establishment today.

Yet another prescription—"We must manage our geo-political realities through friendship and collaboration. Let us appreciate and balance regional political realities for the interest of our peoples. We cannot trade off long-term interests for short-term gains"—may be universally fundamental to statecraft, but may also be seen as directed to those of her countrymen reluctant to forge closer relations with India.

In the months preceding general elections in Bangladesh in December 2018, members of the BNP, which still had the semblance of a cohesive political party, visited India to persuade public opinion on two counts. Firstly, that the party had abjured its hitherto anti-Indian posture and, if re-elected, would pursue a path of co-operation with its neighbour. Secondly, with public opinion in Bangladesh turning rapidly against the Awami League for its mis-governance, it would be in its own interest for India to not be perceived as committed to the Awami League. Some would-be game players in India seemed prone to be not indifferent to the BNP's arguments. Governments in Bangladesh are chosen by its people and Indian endorsement is only of perceived

importance. But perceptions do matter and India's perceived quasi-support to the BNP prior to the 2001 elections and its consequences should not be lightly forgotten.

After two terms in power, it would not be surprising if there is a degree of public apathy towards the Awami League government. But the balance sheet should include a steady increase in the GDP, improvement in all parameters of economic activity as also law and order. Above all, the committed pushback against jihadi activities supported from foreign

in the past months. It has been repeatedly assured at the highest level that it should have no cause for concern. The formula appears to be that the NRC is a Supreme Court mandated exercise for Assam and there are provisions for various stages of appeal. Given the impoverished and uneducated status of those affected, it is questionable how the levels of appeal can be accessed. Nor is there clarity about what transpires when the process is exhausted. The comment of the foreign secretary of Bangladesh: "We were told that this is an internal

of Bangladesh. The Ganga Waters Agreement had removed what had appeared to be an intractable problem permanently vitiating the relationship. Given the emotions aroused over a long period, then PM Hasina had shown great political courage in addressing the issue constructively. The Land and Maritime Boundary Agreements, approached by different means, were of mutual benefit, the former a victim of mutual lethargy over time and finally a four-year hold imposed by the BJP in parliament. Bangladesh would seem to have comprehensively addressed Indian concerns with regard to support to militant elements in the North-east, for long an area of Indian concern. On its part, India continues to be unable to deliver on Teesta. The Ganga Barrage project in Bangladesh carries economic advantages as well as political overtones, but has not been addressed with suitable despatch by India to enable Bangladesh to obtain external funding. Delay in implementation of the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal initiative) is inexplicable. Even if India is not chiefly responsible, one may have expected greater attention. Lastly, the hate mongering and incidents of lynching of Muslims in India cannot but affect public perceptions. It is to the credit of the Awami League government that we have not as yet seen any hostile reactions from the people, considering the reactions after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992. But this can only be a slow burning fuse. One earnestly hopes that India's internal aberrations do not derail the one substantive relationship we have developed in the neighbourhood.



PHOTO: PRAKASH SINGH/AFP

Looking at the balance sheet of Indo-Bangladesh relations, it would have to be acknowledged that the ledger tilts, perhaps heavily, in favour of Bangladesh.

shores. One only has to recall the period prior to Hasina's assumption of power and the sense of helplessness that seemed to prevail with the rising tide of fundamentalism sponsored by the state and its allies.

It could be argued that the Bangladeshi state today has shown intolerance of criticism. The case of the charges against Shahidul Alam is illustrative. Unfortunately, this is an area where Indians today cannot seek to advise.

The National Register of Citizens (NRC) has been a worry for Bangladesh

matter of India. Our relationship is best of the best at present. But at the same time we are keeping our eyes open (on the NRC issue). The words "at present" and "our eyes open" would not have been carelessly uttered. The NRC, to be extended to all of India, may well be largely for internal political objectives, but its eventual fall-out on Bangladesh and Indo-Bangladesh relations is too evident to brush aside.

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Poverty in Bangladesh: Where to focus and how?



AKM NURUZZAMAN

This year's Nobel Prize for Economics has gone to Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, both MIT professors, and Professor Michael Kremer of Harvard

University, for their "experimental approach to alleviating global poverty". Parts of their work focused on some poverty reduction programmes in Bangladesh. Coincidentally, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced the award on October 14, three days before the world marks the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty on October 17. With the UN deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals only 11 years away, what is the poverty scenario in Bangladesh?

Higher growth often accelerates the process of poverty reduction. Riding on its steady economic growth, especially since the 1990s, Bangladesh has fought poverty hard and well, bringing down the poverty level from 59 percent in 1991 to 25 percent in 2016, according to the data of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). During the same period, extreme poverty fell to 13 percent from 43 percent, which is quite an achievement.

Behind this rosy picture, however, lies a sorry state: Bangladesh is still home to around 40 million poor and 21 million extreme poor according

to 2016 data from BBS (HIES 2016). Globally, one in every eleven people are poor, according to 2013 data released by the World Bank in 2016.

Although Bangladesh's success in overall poverty reduction has earned the country global praise and recognitions, there are certain pockets, such as northern districts, coastal belt and haor regions, where poverty still remains deep. While the poverty incidence in some areas remained the same, it has

the incidence of poverty is 71 percent and 64 percent respectively—both higher than that in 2010.

Poverty, often likened to chronic diseases, is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. And to address the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty, any poverty reduction programmes or projects should be context-specific, need-based and demand-driven. Inclusive growth will remain a far cry if we do not give special attention to lift

society play a key role in the inclusion and exclusion process.

Then there is the issue of tomorrow's poor. By the time, say, we lift 2 million poor out of poverty in the next 10 years, in all likelihood there will be a new generation of poor struggling to make their ends meet.

Based only on the financial aspect of poverty, the poor could be categorised as "income poor", i.e., lack of income, and "human poor", i.e., lack of basic human capacity in terms of good education, health, sanitation, safe water and so on. Poor could be classified as "extreme poor", "moderate poor" and "vulnerable non-poor" based on the depth of poverty. Many people who are poor can get out of the poverty trap in a short period of time. However, many a time they fall back into poverty shortly afterwards following sudden shocks, such as ailments or natural disasters. They are "transient poor", the most vulnerable to poverty.

For any poverty elimination programme to be successful and sustainable, all actors—government policymakers, development partners and implementing organisations (NGOs)—must devise appropriate plans for their income generation, and developing and improving their capacity to cope with this vulnerability.

Apart from being income poor, a lack of access to basic services like education, healthcare services, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, electricity and so on, put people at a disadvantageous position and prevent them from living

a decent life. A lack of access to basic services exacerbates income poverty by generating a poverty trap where people cannot improve their living conditions. When a lack of access to basic services is also a consequence of being income poor, this creates a vicious cycle.

One final point. The poor are a highly heterogeneous group rather than a homogenous one. Even the ultra-poor can be highly heterogeneous—some living in rural areas, others in urban areas. Some live in the coastal belt, others on the hills or islands or chars. Even the first-generation ultra-poor and the fifth-generation ultra-poor have varied characteristics and therefore distinctive needs.

As a result, for sustainable poverty reduction, a one-size-fits-all strategy will not work, at least not in the long run for sure. If we are to achieve Goal-1 of the Sustainable Development Goals, that is to eliminate poverty by 2030, we will have to devise need-based holistic programmes and ensure focused targeting. We will also have to multiply our efforts and mobilise resources to address the vulnerabilities of the extreme poor.

For this to be successful, all actors—government policymakers, development partners and NGOs—must join hands to develop a separate strategy to exclusively target the poverty-prone pockets. But all the world's strategies will not bring any good if they are not implemented.

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Targetted programmes to end poverty have shown better results. PHOTO: AFP

reversed in certain other pockets.

In districts like Kurigram, Dinajpur, Sherpur, Nilphamari as well as Hill Tracts region, poverty rate has shot up in the last 10 years, according to data from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016. In Kurigram and Dinajpur for example,

the extreme poor living in areas with higher poverty rate.

That's where targeting comes in, to direct the benefits of the poverty elimination programmes to the ones who need them the most, and soonest. Targeting is important especially because the power dynamics in our

QUOTABLE Quote

JULIAN ASSANGE
(Born 1971)
Australian computer programmer, activist and editor, publisher and founder of WikiLeaks

One of the best ways to achieve justice is to expose injustice.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Shows sorrow
- 5 Utah city near Arches National Park
- 9 Fields
- 11 Terrible
- 13 Southpaw
- 14 Prelude
- 15 Sense of self
- 16 They may be in distress
- 18 "Little Shop of Horrors" star
- 20 "Norma—"
- 21 When pigs fly
- 22 Little rascals
- 23 Tofu base
- 24 Next-to-last letter
- 25 Took turns

DOWN

- 1 Capital on the Willamette
- 2 1-Down's state
- 3 1995 Richard Linklater film
- 4 Was inactive
- 5 Disfigures

27 Homes for koi

29 Ornate planter

30 "The Bodyguard" star

32 Bogs

34 "— had it!"

35 Of service

36 Longings

38 Cuban coins

39 Skier Phil

40 Makes suits

41 Proofing note

6 Possesses

7 Eric Clapton hit

8 Sack material

10 Australian port

12 Places last

17 Vacuum lack

19 Stratford river

22 "—It Roman-tic?"

24 American marsupial

25 Recap

26 Babbles

27 "The Gold-Bug" writer

28 Harsh

30 Mating game

31 Stopwatch button

33 Deliberate

37 — Tafari

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