

Words of friendship from PM Modi

We hope outstanding issues will also be resolved

WE attach great importance to the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh and the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation. Under PM Modi's leadership, Bangladesh-India relations have moved forward significantly, and we believe that the Indian prime minister attaches great importance to the relationship with Bangladesh, which he has made clear through many statements and also practical moves. We, on our part, would like to assure PM Modi that we also recognise the great value of our bilateral relations and will spare no effort to improve it for the mutual benefit of both sides.

During his speech at the centenary and golden jubilee celebrations at National Parade Square, Narendra Modi spoke of the fraternal relations between the two countries also reaching the 50-year mark, and praised the leadership of Bangabandhu in forging the new nation of Bangladesh, saying that it is a matter of pride to India to have been able to confer Bangabandhu with the Gandhi Peace Prize 2020. He also mentioned how the countries worked together and supported each other during the global Covid-19 pandemic, further entrenching the bonds of friendship between the two nations. We greatly appreciate these gestures and words of friendship from the Indian prime minister, and on this occasion, we recall the contribution of the Indian government and its people to the Liberation War of Bangladesh, as well as the sacrifice of their army during our birth 50 years ago. We also thank the Indian government for the great gift of Covid-19 vaccines, including the latest gift of 12 lakh doses that PM Modi has brought on his visit to Bangladesh.

We would like to reiterate that Bangladesh considers its relationship with India as one of the main pillars of our foreign policy. PM Modi, in his special op-ed in *The Daily Star* yesterday, speculated on what would have been the picture of South Asia if Bangabandhu were alive. While doing so, he identified many areas where our relationship can be further advanced. He then goes on to write that even though Bangabandhu is not with us, we now have an opportunity to make progress in all those directions. We, on our part, feel that there is nothing to stop us in moving in that direction, as long as it is always win-win for both sides.

We would also like to stress upon both Bangladesh and India that there is a lot to learn from our past failures, just as there is a lot to celebrate from our past successes. The lessons of the past should not be lost on either side as we build a very bright future. And here we would reiterate that no time should be wasted in removing the irritants that still plague our relations which, given the determination of both the leaders, should not take much time to overcome. Again, we thank PM Modi for this special gesture of making his first foreign trip after Covid-19 to Bangladesh, and on our part, we assure him that we will do our best to reciprocate the goodwill that he has created.

Struggling families of freedom fighters

Govt's efforts to honour their sacrifices must be more vigorous

A report published by *The Daily Star* on Thursday has brought to light the acute hardship that the family of a martyred freedom fighter is going through, who are yet to receive any official allowance from the government as they are entitled to. For the last 11 years, the only son of the family has been consistently requesting the concerned ministry to recognise his father's contributions during the liberation war, but to no avail. More perplexing is that both the government and the local Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) are aware of the war hero's identity, while the former had also promised his family that they would start getting benefits starting this year. But that promise has not been fulfilled yet. Why is that? Is it bureaucracy that is causing the delay? And for 11 years? Surely these matters can be solved with greater speed and efficiency and local officials can verify the claim and, if found true, expedite the process of providing allowance to the family.

Sadly, this is not an isolated case. Just three days ago, this daily reported a similar story where a living freedom fighter was not being able to get the allowance due to him. When the government had launched a verification process for drafting a new freedom fighters' list in 2017, this 70-year-old man submitted all the necessary documents to the Jatiya Muktiyoddha Council (National Freedom Fighters' Council) for his inclusion. Four years have passed since then, but the council is yet to decide whether to recognise this septuagenarian as a war hero or not.

We know that the government has made various provisions available to honour our freedom fighters, including a monthly allowance, five festival bonuses, free medical care and housing facilities for the wounded and uprooted war veterans. We also thank the prime minister who announced, on February 15, 2021, that the freedom fighter allowance is going to be increased from Tk 12,000 to Tk 20,000 after the announcement of the next budget.

But all these perks are not going to bear any fruit if the true war heroes and their families are excluded from the latest list of freedom fighters. Respective authorities like the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs and the above-mentioned council have to make sure that imposters claiming to be freedom fighters do not find their way into the official list using political influences, and that the real ones get their due acknowledgement in a proper and timely manner.



BLOWN IN THE WIND

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

“WHY do they even try? They don't sound like us!” My mother was referring to the “bong” accents emulated by some of the Indian actors who occupy our living rooms

every evening. That does not stop these characters from becoming regular guests of our evening party. They are beamed into our lives to remind us of a bordering culture that has become borderless, and millions of local viewers have embraced it as their own. They become a part of our “lived experience” as we identify with the presented characters, and our “real memories” as we process them as brain codes.

The popularity of pseudo-addiction to the melodrama of the Indian TV serials—the craving for a high-voltage family conflict or mushy-mushy romance, the traction of strange religiosity, the political intrigues or village politics—is helped by the viewing habits of our local audience. They thrive because there is a demand for such a brand of entertainment; they flourish because they have the open border and space to inundate our deltaic flood plain with the supply of such entertainment. The push and pull of these borderless TV bytes depict a dirty picture of entertainment, entertainment and entertainment—and the way we indulge in this entertainment logic tells a lot about our social identity and cultural behaviour. It shows the deep-rooted connection that lies at the hearts of the people who share the same language and culture.

Then again, how do I differentiate my binge-watching of Netflix or Amazon series from the viewing of these TV soaps? Why do many (of my social orientation or cultural background) adopt a moral and intellectual high ground while dismissing the so-called encroachment of the “sky culture” of Indian channels? While the high production cost of the series and selected viewership due to language may bracket these streaming services as “elite” pop culture, the Bangla serials—targeting mainly the female viewership with crafted “wishful identification”—may fall under the category of “mass culture”. Both have entertainment values as they activate our brains through releasing the happy

hormone dopamine. Now, why do I cry havoc when a particular generation or gender finds it pleasurable to identify with the Bengali characters with a different accent, while another age or cultural group is drawn to a transnational experience? There are surely some double standards in the way we negotiate foreign media. But here, I will try to understand why such imported items find validity in our space and inform our responses.

While accompanying my mother in

moral demarcation lines, as well as for the tenacity to pursue a husband's love till death does the couple apart. The fantasy is teased through men from upper-class backgrounds taking interest in women from the lower class.

There is nothing extraordinary about the choreography, cinematography, dialogue or plotlines. One wonders why such dramas cannot be made here and parcelled abroad. Well, the ads promoting the app during the commercial breaks

crore a year. Now the big question is, why do these local brands not come to the aid of local channels to revamp the quality of the content? Wishful thinking on my part.

The reality is that the Bangladeshi private television media is suffering as they never had the right business model to begin with. They are all competing in a very small market, and do not have the best technology and resources to open up their market to the outside world. The channels solely depend on ad revenues. The unhealthy competition in the industry has allowed the corporate sector to reduce ad fees, asking for more space against the price they are paying. In the process, our TV programmes have become the proverbial zebra: we do not know whether it is a black animal in white, or the other way round. In other words, we do not know whether we are watching ads during dramas or dramas during ads. Thus, we have left our zebras alone and changed channels to throng before the cages of a motley horse that tames the audience with its circus tricks.

Why can't we have our own horses? The nationalist in me will bleed. Well, it's easy for trucks to cross borders, but not your cultural horses! Apparently, Bangladeshi channel owners find it difficult to match the downlinking fees of Rs 15 lakh and the net worth of Tk 5 crore that a company needs to have in its base country. The figures do not sound that daunting given the ones that are rumoured to fly out of the country every now and then.

The problem lies in a dearth of sincerity. The popularity of the Bangla TV serials shows that at a subconscious level, the citizens of both countries feel the push and pull to remain connected. They have some common ground to tread. But then again, the political and commercial interests do not often make these exchanges possible in a respectful manner.

With the Indian prime minister in town, sharing the glory of the 50th anniversary of our independence, one hopes that his visit would encourage his cohort to make the cultural and political exchanges more meaningful. The receptive audience shows that this new media is a strong platform where the imaginary borders that separate the people of the same language group can be reimagined.

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Binge-watching borderless borders



'One wonders why such dramas cannot be made here and parcelled abroad.'

ILLUSTRATION:
BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

the TV room for the last few weeks, I have got some idea of all the plotlines of the drama serials aired by a popular Indian TV channel. The underlying motifs are very simple, yet fantastic: there is usually a woman who is socially marginalised because of her skin colour (e.g. Krishnakoli), lowly profession (e.g. Mithai the sweet maker's daughter, Jamuna Dhaki the daughter of a temple drummer), or her rural background (e.g. Rimli). Somehow this female character is catapulted into an upper-class setting where she finds herself at the centre of a family drama. These central characters are usually shown as very honest, committed, dedicated and intelligent, but simple. They enact the mythical or stereotypical virtues of Indian women who have to be ready for the gambles of their husbands, for the humiliation in a public place, for the social, ethical and

do hint that there is a trickle of cultural pushback from our enclaves, but that too through a limited corridor guarded by cultural custom officers and security censorship. The Indian media knows that they need some Bangladeshi dramas, characters and dialects in place to keep our local audience interested. Just like in IPL they need one or two of us (literally) to keep the local viewers engaged with the million-taka question: will they let him play tonight or not?

There was a court case a couple of years back when the cable TV operators were found guilty of showing programmes where Bangladeshi ads were being shown in foreign channels. Our tax-collectors were perturbed by the fact that the national audience were seeing local ads in foreign media outlets without paying them taxes—how dare they? They estimated that they were losing Tk 1,000

A spectacular spectrum auction vs. a thriving telecommunications marketplace

MOINUL ZABER

ON the eve of March 8, 2021, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) officials were smiling—the 2021 4G auction brought a lot of money to the public exchequer! After 81 rounds, the auction ended with USD 46.75 million/MHz for 15 years, making it a record in recent years. Congratulations BTRC! However, please don't forget that most successful auctions are not necessarily the ones that bring the most revenue, and the top priority of spectrum auctions is to support affordable and high-quality telecommunications services. The latter can only be done if the regulatory regime is less uncertain, the operators' operational cost is manageable, and regulatory oversight on the marketplace is firmly established.

The information and communications technology reduces inequality, ensures good governance, and improves human capital. It is well-recognised that a robust and thriving telecommunications marketplace is one of the prerequisites of achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Wireless spectrum bands are the conduits of mobile telephony. Generally speaking, more spectrum ensures a better quality of service to the users. However, the spectrum needs to be allocated efficiently as the usable spectrum is scarce. Governments around the world provide spectrum licenses to operators for the best use of the resource. Among the many users of the spectrum, mobile phone companies generate the highest revenue. From time to time, the Bangladesh government, through BTRC, releases spectrum for different use. Since 2013, Bangladesh has been auctioning off specific bands of spectrum. However, not all of the auctions resulted in success. The 4G auction in 2018 was not a happy story to tell.

Traditionally, there are two spectrum assignment methods—auction and administrative award, popularly termed as a beauty contest. In administrative award, applicants submit proposals to be evaluated by the authority for assignment. In auctions, the operators compete against each other and the highest bidder generally becomes the winner. Research and practice show that auctions, if designed carefully, can ensure the best use of spectrum band. Revenue from spectrum award came into sharp focus in 2000 when the UK 3G auction raised 22 billion pounds.

Subsequently, auction in Germany raised even more. These auctions opened the eyes of the national governments. Countries started to think of spectrum auctions as a way to reduce their growing national budget gap. The history of auctions shows that in many countries, the high price paid to grab spectrum band caused a rollout failure and, in the end, consumers were left with a high-priced, low-quality service.

The 2021 auction assured the government close to double the sum it hoped for as reserved price for the 2100 MHz. The two most prominent market players competed with each other for more than 65 rounds in what can be

the expansion of infrastructure that is needed to ensure efficient use of the asset. And if that happens, then in the end, the consumers will pay the price by paying more money and getting worse service.

In theory, the price paid for spectrum should be treated as “sunk cost”, which should never impact the operational price. However, the thing is, after getting spectrum, operators need to invest a large amount in infrastructure development. In a market where the regulators do not have enough capacity to oversee the marketplace, it is difficult to make sure that all the operators are keeping their commitments to ensure

data packages, bundled voice and data packages, etc. In most, if not all, the neighbours are performing better than Bangladesh. This means that we pay more than our neighbours to access data services. Hence, one of the regulatory goals is to reduce the affordability gap that exists in emerging economies.

As spectrum is now available, BTRC needs to concentrate on removing all roadblocks against rolling out. Increasing coverage and ensuring service quality are prerequisites of reducing the affordability gap. Presently, not more than 30 percent of the country is covered by 4G—the technology that is optimised for mobile broadband. However, firms are unlikely to invest if the regulatory environment is uncertain, the operational cost is high, and profits are negligible. Even today, most of the operators claim that they are not making any profit. On the other hand, users are suffering from call drops, low data rate, and many other quality-of-service issues. Till today, only around 15 percent of cell towers are connected via fibre-optic lines, which is a major hurdle to better coverage. The fibre companies need to be monitored for quality of service. Also, the present Towerco regime that separates the operators from the tower owners needs to be monitored so that towers are built at a higher pace. Any collusion and uncompetitive behaviour in the fibre and tower sectors will create more regulatory uncertainty and hinder the rollout process.

BTRC may also lobby to reduce the data-specific taxes and levies further. Already, VAT imposed on data use is 5 percent, which is lower than the VAT for any other commodity. However, most of the burdens of taxes and levies fall upon the users. Until better service quality is ensured—and while the operators expand their mobile broadband network—the government should make sure that, at least for the next few years, the infrastructure builders, network providers, service givers, and consumers pay the least. This should help improve the coverage and enhance the diffusion of mobile broadband. At the same time, BTRC should be vigilant to check cross-subsidy, predatory pricing, and reduce the confusion on data packages that are prevalent in the present market. The 2021 spectrum is a good start but there are still miles to go before BTRC can rest.

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File photo of Telecom Minister Mustafa Jabbar and top officials of mobile phone companies at a media briefing after the spectrum auction held on March 8, 2021.

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GP

called a “war of attrition”, coined by the famous game theorist John Maynard Smith. This indicates that the operators were hungry for more bandwidth and were in fear of failing to grab enough. At the end of the day, it seems that for a similar product, different operators paid differently, and even though the operators may not say so, there is a chance that this upfront payment may affect their rollout process.

BTRC's task is to ensure the best use of spectrum. That means it has to make sure that the asset is neither overvalued nor undervalued. Many would argue that the price paid by the mobile network organisations (MNOs) was too high for our market. If that is the case, there is a chance that the MNOs will not have much in their pocket to pay for

affordable and quality access. However, there are a few regulatory initiatives that can be considered by BTRC to ensure the market has the necessary mechanisms to keep it robust and growing.

A majority of the users in Bangladesh access ICT services through the mobile network. Therefore, it is important that the network is robust, and the pricing of mobile broadband is affordable. However, according to a report published in 2019 by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the UN body responsible for telecommunications, the price of data in Bangladesh is higher than our neighbours like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Myanmar. The report provides comparative analyses of high and low use packages, fixed