

New Agenda for SAARC

At a recent seminar entitled "South Asia in the Post Cold War Era" organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, former Foreign Secretary of India, Jagat Mehta, highlighted the need for greater cooperation and understanding among the nations of this region. Giving a glimpse of the problems that beset efforts for regional cooperation by referring to "old animosities", Mehta also pointed to the way ahead.

That way ahead lies in a new and greatly expanded agenda for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). This has now become vital because, in the dramatically changed world scenario, developing countries have to draw strength from their own material and intellectual resources. In the six years since the establishment of SAARC, the association has not been able to make much headway in any of the areas where such a multilateral body would normally have been most effective.

Political and security-related issues have largely been out of bounds for SAARC; trading activities among the South Asian seven have remained minimal, as individual SAARC member-countries has concentrated on exporting to and importing from other, more lucrative markets; cultural exchanges too have been stagnant at the officially-sponsored level, while other human contacts have remained where they would have been had there been no SAARC anyway. Despite the rhetoric, SAARC is still a long way from the envisioned Family of South Asian Nations.

For the scenario to change, the initiative must come from the seven governments to regard one another as "natural partners." Geographical, historical and cultural links make the seven more than just neighbours. The benefits that can be derived from greater cooperation are immense, and we only have to look few miles to the east, to the Association of South-East Asian Nations or ASEAN, to realise that.

One of the major problems, of course, has been the animosity and distrust among the people of the region, based on historical experience, but also misperception. As a body, SAARC can and must do a great deal more to break down that powerful barrier. This calls for greater cultural interactions — especially at the private, non-government levels — and people-to-people contact among the seven. With that aim in view, SAARC should adopt a policy of visa liberalisation leading eventually to total abolition. We need to have many more of our scholars, artists, poets, writers, educationalists, students and others visiting one another's country in order to feel as one.

We have spent a lot of time discussing non-controversial and low-key issues, with all major topics left to bilateral arrangements. That approach, unfortunately, has not produced the desired result. We should now be bold enough to firmly take up issues that could contribute to the growth of mutual trust and evolution of lasting and peaceful relations in the region.

The end of the Cold War has also given us a chance to bury previously-held misconceptions, such as viewing the friendship between India and the Soviet Union as an anti-Pakistan alliance, or regarding close US ties with Pakistan as an anti-Indian manoeuvre. There are no "superpower card" to play in regional politics anymore, and if there still is one, that too should be discarded for the growth of healthy relations. In addition to human contacts, there should be greater and regular interactions at the decision-making level in order to foster an atmosphere of trust at the highest state levels. There is a great deal to be done to put substance into the SAARC concept, and the time to do it is now.

Lalon Unsung

The 101st death anniversary of Fakir Lal Shah passed last Thursday with more of a whimper than the bang the occasion deserved. Yet, Lal's contribution to the culture — in the broadest possible term — of this country can hardly be overestimated. The great baul's works left a lasting impression on Rabindra Nath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam — the Viswakabi and the Rebel — and influenced their works to a great extent. It wasn't the music of Lal, but the message, expressed implicitly as well explicitly through his songs, that enriched the body and soul of Bangalee culture.

Lal's songs, and those of countless other bauls traversing the green landscape on either side of the mighty Ganges, spoke of the great oneness: the spiritual unity of Man and the oneness of all religions and philosophies. Lal's thoughts travelled far high above the earthly plane — untouched and uncorrupted by anything that divided men on the ground he trod.

Inspiration came from above, and from the Books, the Vedas as well as the holy Quran, but always enriched by the land and all that it had to offer life and Man — the rivers, trees, crops. The spiritual Lal was always one step away from man's temporal existence, yet always an integral part of everything that united man with man and nature. In the mysterious world of the baul — was Lalon really a mystic, or did the mediocre, materialistic man miss the whole point? — there never was a greater truth than himself. The Rebel poet might have written "I am the Truth" in a fit of anger, but the baul simply knew.

But we remain mystified. The lack of any official programme meant that Lal was kept firmly on the fringes of our national culture. Strange, we see a giant amongst men, yet we still pretend he is a dwarf!

It may sound like a knee-jerk reaction to suggest commemoration of Lalon anniversaries at the national level, but that is exactly what is needed to bring the greatest of all bauls into the mainstream of national culture. In addition, the government should undertake a major initiative to popularise Lalon's works — unedited and uncensored — through publication of books and cassettes, as well as production of films and documentaries.

Peace Talks Equation Looks Good for Israel

Michael Jansen writes from Nicosia

Several times a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli problem has seemed at hand. Each time efforts stopped short — mostly, some say, because Israel did not think it was in a strong position to negotiate. The Gulf War vanquished Israel's strongest foe and weakened its other traditional sparring partners. That could mean, reports Gemini News Service, that the Jewish state — public intransigence notwithstanding — is finally ready to make a deal.

"moderate" Arab powers — Jordan, Egypt and the PLO — seeking a negotiated settlement with Israel. Iraq's departure from that pre-war quartet means that its three remaining members enter current talks with far less bargaining power, a weakness exacerbated by the fact that Jordan and the PLO opposed the US-led coalition in the Gulf.

The Kuwait conflict also precipitated the collapse of a second Arab power bloc, the radical "steadfastness" front comprising Syria, Libya and several Damascus-based Palestinian groups which rejected talks with Israel. That front disintegrated when Syria, deprived of its key political and military backers by the Communist collapse in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, pulled out to join the US-led coalition.

Instead of resisting the peace process, Syria assumed the leading role in August when President Hafez al-Assad accepted Bush's conference proposals. Bush then invited Libya, the most radical of the radicals, to attend.

Israel's negotiating position has also been improved by the Soviet Union's abandonment of its former allies, the PLO and Syria. The US has crafted its peace proposals to induce a reluctant Israeli government to take part. International involvement in talks, demanded by the Arabs, is to be limited to a formal opening session launching one-to-one substantive negotiations between the Jewish and Arab states, bilateral talks on which Israel has always insisted.

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir insists that the conference will have "no powers whatsoever," and will not meet again after the initial ceremonial session. Although the process is to be based on United Nations Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, which require Israel to withdraw from occupied Arab territory, the US has refused to insist on Israeli compliance, the demand put forward by the Arabs. Instead, Washington says these resolutions have different

when the Arab League adopted a Saudi peace plan at its summit in Fez.

That plan offered a comprehensive peace leading to full Arab recognition of the Jewish state in exchange for Israel's withdrawal from all Arab territory captured in 1967 and the creation of a Palestinian mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza.

The second chance came in 1988-89 when the Palestine National Council, the PLO's parliament-in-exile, renounced "terrorist" attacks against Israeli civilians and declared itself willing to recognise the existence of Israel in exchange for Palestinian self-determination in the occupied territories.

Both times Israel was politically isolated and unwilling to negotiate. In 1982 it stood condemned for its brutal invasion of Lebanon and for the massacre by its Lebanese allies of Palestinian civilians at the Sabra and Chatila camps near Beirut.

Then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin rejected the peace proposal put forward by then US President Ronald Reagan.

In 1988-89, because of its ruthless suppression of the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories, Israel came under strong international pressure to join a peace process.

Today Israel is in a more congenial situation, largely because of the aftermath of the Gulf war. — GEMINI NEWS

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The Arab world and Israel



PACIFIC leaders should be forgiven for wondering what dictionary the United States' Interior Department uses.

Webster's defines "self-determination" as: "Determination of one's acts by oneself without external compulsion."

Not, however, in the Pacific — according to Stalla Guerra, the US Interior Department's assistant secretary of territorial and international affairs.

Ms Guerra, the point person of the Bush administration in the Pacific, recently announced that "Self-determination means the choice of generally recognised political status, with specifics to be worked out and mutually agreed to by the parties."

"Self-determination does not mean, and has never meant, the right of one party to unilaterally determine the specific terms of its relationship with another party."

The so-called Guerra Maxims on self-determination describe an unabashedly colonial US government attitude toward its territories.

As US President George Bush rushes to recognise the newly independent Baltic nations — heralding their unilateral decision to exit from the crumbling Soviet empire — his administration is telling islanders in the American-affiliated Pacific that they do not

Self-determination Not in Agenda of 'American' Pacific

Giff Johnson writes from Majuro

have the same unilateral right to decide their futures.

That a paradox so blatant can be served up as US "policy" to the Pacific indicates the nature of the US's self-proclaimed new world order.

The Bush administration has recognised and will probably provide foreign aid to newly independent Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. But would it

"American" Pacific.

The Interior Department has been moving quickly to follow up words with deeds. Examples abound.

The Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia fell in step with "free association" agreements

in anticipation of terminating the last UN Trusteeship in favour of a long term relationship with the US.

The Interior Department's response to the latest defeat of a long term pact with Palau was to bring Palau under tight control from Washington. In

American military facilities. Guam leaders believe that their neighbours — the Marshalls, Federated States of Micronesia and the Marianas — have gained better deals with the US.

Guamanians are now pushing for changes in their colonial status in hopes of gaining more authority over their island. They have roundly criticised the Interior Department for foot dragging.

In 1975, the Northern Marianas Islands jumped up at a US offer of Commonwealth status that looked good then. Today, however, Marianas leaders look with envy at the free association pacts between the US and the Marshalls and the Federated States of

If you are puzzled about the US Interior Department — equivalent to the British Home Affairs office — managing affairs of independent Pacific nations, welcome to the 'American' Pacific

do the same for a US-affiliated Pacific island if it declared its independence. Not likely.

The US Interior Department controls the purse strings and monitors all US aid to the American-affiliated islands, including the Marshall Islands and the Federated State of Micronesia which gained UN membership in September.

If you are puzzled about the US Interior Department — equivalent to the British Home Affairs office — managing affairs of independent Pacific nations, welcome to the

with the US. But Palau has refused, since 1981, to approve a deal giving the US extensive military options on Palau land.

Palau, a north Pacific island group, has a nuclear-free Constitution. Through seven referenda, voters have bucked Pentagon hopes to secure real estate that is quickly escalating in value with the imminent removal of all US bases in the Philippines.

Since 1980, the US has been granting Palau — and its neighbours the Marshalls and the Federated States of Micronesia — increasing control of its internal and foreign

1990, the Interior Department stationed an American resident commissioner in Palau.

He must approve all government expenditures and major policy actions. Palau leaders were outraged. But Ms Guerra and the Interior Department, as if chastising a recalcitrant child, admonished Palauans for mismanagement and poor control of their government. The all-powerful American commissioner remains.

Guam, an unincorporated territory of the US north of Palau, hosts important

Micronesia — which grant them nearly total control of foreign affairs.

The Marianas, as a commonwealth, are stuck with the US federal government controlling its foreign relations, fisheries and refusing to recognise a 200-mile exclusive economic zone. Marianas leaders are agitating for increased home rule, but the US Interior Department is unsympathetic.

The political status of the Marshalls and the Federated States of Micronesia is resolved. But the Interior Department has been wrangling with Bikini Island residents over who controls a US\$90 million nuclear cleanup and resettlement trust fund.

Ms Guerra says the Interior Department must approve every expenditure. But the Bikinians cite the law passed by the US Congress giving them sole authority and responsibility for cleaning up Bikini, including control of the trust fund. They have been stalemated for more than a year.

(Giff Johnson is editor of the weekly Marshall Islands Journal.)

OPINION

Violence and Education

If a question is asked whether a real academic atmosphere is prevailing in the educational institutions of the country including the universities, I think the answer will be very much in the negative. Everyday, students go there for the sake of studies but most of the time they fail to attend classes for fear of terrorist activities or violence.

When students get out, worries of guardians know no bounds. Specially, the guardians of female students seem much more worried till their wards return home safely.

We know that the cause of their anxiety is not unfounded. Sometimes, student activists of different political parties turn violent all on a sudden on the campus. Usually they resort to indiscriminate firing and bomb blasts to create a panicky situation. Innocent students are seen running hither and thither for safety. This is a common scene in most of our educational institutions. The irony is that when armed clashes take place between the feuding groups, members of law-enforcing agencies prefer to stay at a safe distance. They intervene when no more gun shots are heard.

Terrorism in the university tells heavily on the health of learners there. Talking to a female student recently I came to know that she has developed a chronic dysentery out of tension. Repeated incidents of violence gives rise to nervous break down of many a students, she told.

The number of female students in the university is sharply reducing day by day. The background is obviously violence. On one particular occasion, I didn't find any female student in the university library in the evening.

Once the university was an ideal place of learning. Today, students are frequently found chasing their opponents with

arms in hands. The situation is so grave that the Dhaka University authority has set up a unique example of holding Milad, Mahfil for peaceful commencement of examinations there. It is exactly like seeking divine blessings for students human efforts having been failed to tackle the situation. Today, sincerely speaking, we are worried of students' politics. Democracy teaches us to be tolerant of others views. Is it followed by our students? Democracy is such a system where every one has a right to speak. So it is quite natural that problems will evolve. Do our students ever try to sink differences amicably? They do not even realise that violence begets violence and problems can never be overcome through creation of further problems.

There is a democratically elected government in the country. Now everything should be judged from democratic point of view. If it is believed that the government has people's mandate to run the state machinery, effective steps should immediately be taken to free the educational institutions from the clutches of the armed hoodlums. A "consensus" has to be reached among the major political parties to restore peaceful academic atmosphere there. And this is perhaps, the prime need of the hour.

The success of the ruling as well as opposition parties will in many respects depend how effectively they can combat terrorism. Since unified action of the political parties succeeded in removing autocracy from the country, why not the same role be played by them to snatch arms from the hands of students?

Md. Atiqul Karim Jigatala Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

An appeal to Dhaka Board

Sir, I passed the HSC examination of Dhaka Board in the year 1989 with an aggregate of 807 marks to my credit. I got myself admitted to the Chittagong Medical College (CMC) from where I was subsequently transferred to Mymensingh Medical College (MMC) under auto-migration programme. At Mymensingh, it came to my knowledge that my scholarship money amounting to Tk 1,200/- plus Tk 200/- for purchase of books as a scholar of Dhaka Board had been transmitted to CMC and, therefore, a formal letter requesting the CMC authorities to place the scholarship money at the disposal of MMC authorities was initiated by the latter. Since then a year has elapsed, but no such scholarship money has been placed or distributed. Similar request had been made by the college authorities in due course. But they preferred maintaining silence on the issue for the reasons best known to them. I would like to mention here that as many as 50 students including myself from various medical colleges have been transferred to MMC under auto-migration and quite a good number of them are Board scholars. None of them has received any scholarship still date. I learnt from my seniors that they also had to face

similar harassments in getting scholarship money for which they had to wait long two to three years. This is not desirable and we want to get rid of such harassments.

Shamoli Yasmin 1st year (old), Mymensingh Medical College, Mymensingh.

Kochuri-pana

Sir, Our paper mills are reported to be facing shortage of raw materials (Star, Oct 9). I recall, that in the early '50s, I had seen some samples of fountain pen bodies (barrels) made of processed water hyacinth (kochuri-pana) by a local scientist.

BCSIR might be able to tell us if this abundant raw material could be commercially exploited by the developing countries for making various products, including paper and plastic-based materials.

With an internal paper market of over 60 million consumers, it is necessary to plan well ahead to ensure a steady supply of local raw materials for the production of paper and paper products; especially if our primary education schemes could take off as planned (it never did). The local market is flooded with imported papers (even non-specialized types) — a situation inconceivable even a decade back.

A. Mawaz Dhaka

Culture of 'spirulina'

Sir, Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) recently arranged a technology exhibition in which I got an opportunity to visit. There I came close to some scientists engaged in briefing about the samples of the processes developed by the scientists. In one stage I evinced keen interest in a sample of spirulina, a microscopic plant. I came to know that various nutritious food can be prepared by it. This plant is rich in vitamin B12 and iron. Besides, it contains protein and other minerals. So, spirulina is a potential food. In our country where 80 per cent men, women and children are suffering from nutrition ailment, spirulina may be used so much beneficially.

I also heard that process for culture of spirulina is being leased out to a local entrepreneur. My opinion in this regard is that spirulina culture should be disseminated to every nook and corner of the country so that people as a whole can get opportunity to meet their protein and vitamin deficiency. In this regard process for culture of spirulina should be leased out to the farmers living in rural areas and not only to particular entrepreneurs.

Zohidul Haq Azimpur, Dhaka.

Our drawback

Sir, The contemporary life of Bangladesh seems to be a helpless victim of a non-biological kind of insidious virus which has assailed us at various levels, viz. personal, social, national. I mean the overwhelming propensity of offering aid, suggestions, sermons, etc

on every conceivable subject on any occasion or to any one who commits the indiscretion of confiding one's problem of any kind to any one around him, be his friend, relative, casual acquaintance. The problem appears all the more jarring at the national level. Whenever you open a newspaper or confront any printed media or tune in to radio or TV, for a substantial part the avalanche of advice, counsel, sermon, exhortation, especially when observing a particular day or occasion is overwhelming to the point of driving one crazy. We have occasions to listen to foreign radio broadcasts or read foreign press but we find little evidence of this abominable proclivity there.

It seems we have developed extraordinary capacities as preachers without caring a whit about the more important need to practice what we preach. This contradiction between profession and practice is perhaps one of our drawbacks.

A S M Nurunnabi Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka.

Mother

Sir, Last 'Shatarupa', a BTV's magazine programme for the women, was entirely devoted to paying tributes to 'Ma' (mother). The programme was well-viewed and quite educative. Mothers obviously deserve a dignified position in every society of the human civilization. But alas! Marys in our society are not in a honourable state: they are frequently subjected to torture and defamation.

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