

Interview

'Bangladesh Should Make Tin Bigha an Urgent Issue'

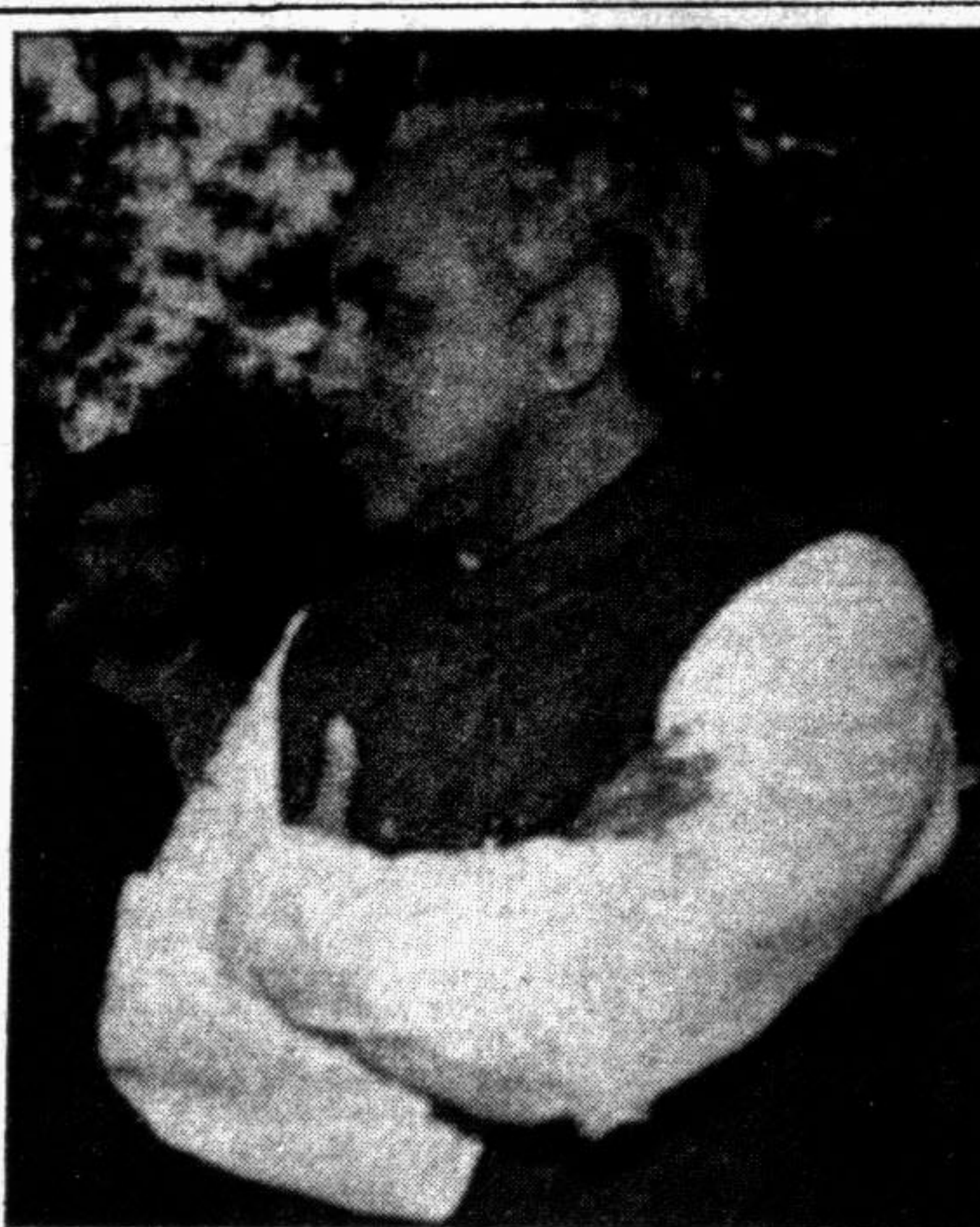
AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW OF MR. SUBRAMANIAMSWAMY, INDIAN MINISTER OF COMMERCE, LAW AND JUSTICE, TO THE DAILY STAR.

By Mahfuz Anam in Seoul

SEOUL, April 5: The following interview took place here where the Indian minister had come to address the 47th session of ESCAP. Star: Let's start with a general question. How do you view Indo-Bangladesh relations at the moment? Answer: Since the Chandra Shekhar's government has taken power there has not been any major problems with Bangladesh nor with any of our other neighbours. The main reason for India's problems with her neighbours is that India does not seem to understand that by itself, India constitutes 70 per cent of the SAARC. India's behaviour is not commensurate with her size, resources, power and position. The bigger we are, the more is our strength to accommodate. If we take that approach I think our relations with our neighbours will improve. This is the approach of Chandra Shekhar's government and it is already paying its dividends in our relations with Nepal and Pakistan. Recently, in connection with the kidnapping of the daughter of a NIP from Kashmir, Pakistan played a very cooperative role. Instead of exploiting the situation as it would otherwise do. An accommodating attitude by India will go a long way in improving Indo-Bangladesh attitude. It is my firm belief that India must be conscious as to how she appears to her neighbours — big, powerful, overwhelming in many respects. It is easy for us to appear to look like a bully even when we are demanding what is legitimately ours. So we must be accommodating, without of course conceding what is of national interest. However, about Indo-Bangladesh relations I would underline one thing to the leaders and the people of Bangladesh. It is about the rise of fundamentalism. Star: You must be aware that in the recent Bangladesh elections the fundamentalist forces did not make any headway. A-Yes, that is a very positive sign. It is my view that funda-

(Born in September 1939, Mr. Subramaniam Swamy has a Ph.D from Harvard in Economics. He was a professor of Economics at Delhi University and joined politics in the sixties. At present he is a Member of Rajya Sabha. He is a two-time former member of Lok Sabha and is currently President of Janata Party which is expected to merge with Chandra Shekhar's Janata Dal (S). Mr. Swamy was the main negotiator that brought Congress support behind Mr. Shekhar and propelled him to the Indian premiership.)

something in return for us. Janata government's attitude is based on the principle of capability — how much we are capable of conceding matched by those of our neighbours. That is why whenever the Janata government comes to power the relations with the neighbours improves, while the reverse is the case whenever Congress comes to power. Remember the good neighbourly relations during Morarji Desai's time. Star — Janata government's approach sounds good. But unfortunately you are not going to be in power for long. So, for the period that your government is still in power — meaning till the time of the elections — can we expect some move on these two issues? A — Unfortunately not. The time is too short and the election is uppermost in everybody's mind. Star — Sir, the Tin Bigha question again. The Indian Supreme Court has already opined in favour of Bangladesh. There exists now no legal or other obstacles in handing over this land. We know it is going to happen, because the law is in our favour. But this unnecessary delay is leaving a bad taste in our mouth. As the Justice Minister why don't you do something? A — I am having the matter looked into. To tell you frankly, this issue is not on the top of



Subramaniam Swamy

Indian politicians' mind. Everyone is busy with other things. So left to normal bureaucratic dispensations, it is likely to take a long time. Therefore I suggest that your leaders should take it up with the Indian government and accelerate the process. Bangladesh government should make it an urgent issue and take it up with us. Bureaucrats

will delay the matter. Political pressure must be created. Star — Sir, as you know significant trade imbalances exist between India and Bangladesh. We have urged for a greater import of Bangladeshi goods by India. Do you think there are goods and services that India could import from us to reduce the current imbalance? A — Yes, I do. Bangladesh should encourage free flow of

which it should not. Let us find out our complementarities. What can Bangladesh export to us and what we can to you. We could have free trade in some areas and restricted trade in others. What we need to do is to have more communication. I am very disturbed at the lack of communication that now exists between our two countries, given India's intimate links with the liberation of Bangladesh. Star — Who do you think is at fault for this lack of communication? A — Both sides. The thing about lack of communication is getting out of hand. We must build links at various govern-

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goods between the two countries. As you know there is a considerable amount of unofficial trade... Star — You mean smuggling, Sir. A — Yes. But this unofficial trade does not help either of our countries. Therefore we should encourage free trade through our borders. Star — But, Sir, there is fear in Bangladesh that a free trade will overwhelmingly favour India. A — To some extent you are right. But not in all respects. What we should do is to sit down and find out what are the areas in which free trade should operate and areas in

mental and non-governmental levels and find out where we can co-operate and where we cannot. I repeat, we must find out our complementarities, for which we must increase communication between the two countries. To me it is of fundamental importance. Star — Now, turning to your internal situation, what about an electoral understanding between Rajiv Gandhi and Chandra Shekhar? A — I have been trying very hard to bring that about. But surprisingly there is more resistance about such understanding from Chandra

Shekhar than from Rajiv Gandhi. Star — Why is that? A — It is the way Chandra Shekhar is. If he feels that his self respect has been unduly hurt then he will go to any length to assuage it. The behaviour of Rajiv Gandhi, especially during late February and early March, is seen by Shekhar as directed to humiliate him. So he is now adamantly against any understanding with Congress and Rajiv. However I think it will be in the national interest if these two leaders and their parties can work together. I keep on trying to bring such an understanding about. Star — My final question deals with Indo-Soviet relations and its impact on India's relations with China. Sir, with the collapse of the USSR as a superpower will India's strong pro-Soviet foreign policy be changed? Will it result in an improvement of relations with China? A — India's foreign policy is likely to become more balanced not due to collapse of the socialist bloc but due to the realisation that technology, credit and expertise now lies with the west. The Soviet model has failed and that there is very little for us to learn from it — except that we should not go in that direction. In addition the younger generation in India, and the professional class, look upon the United States and the west as the success story. So natural tendency is to go in that direction. These factors will change our foreign policy, not necessarily the collapse of the Soviet Union as a superpower. As for relations with China, they are already improving, slowly and steadily. It will move on its own independent momentum. I really don't see any dramatic development or breakthrough in that direction. Star — Thank you very much for seeing me and for the generous share of time that you have given me.

Feature Education

UPE and Literacy: Some Issues and Options

THE existing formal primary education system with about 45 thousand primary schools and some 195,000 teachers in Bangladesh have, in fact, the potentiality of offering most of the country's children (6-10 years) their right to a minimum education. Despite 18% allocations in the First Plan, 47% in the Second Plan and 46% in the Third Plan respectively for primary education, out of the total outlay for education sector, Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme has neither progressed satisfactorily nor progressed significantly. On the other hand, all the previous plan documents only mentioned about Non-Formal Education (NFE) as an alternative delivery system for providing education and skill training to the vast multitude of illiterates who are outside the purview of formal education frame of the country. But no concerted effort has yet been made to plan and implement a comprehensive programme on NFE. The only project that has some semblance of non-formal education is the center based adult literacy activity conducted through Mass Education Project (MEP) that was launched in 1980, discontinued in 1982, and revived again in 1987. The most salient of the factors for non achievement of primary education is the inequitable character of the formal system and its inefficiency and inability to reach and offer the vast majority of the people a basic education within a stipulated time frame. Out of an estimated 1.51 crore primary age group children (6-10 years) about 1.14 crore are enrolled in 1990 leaving another 37 lakh outside the purview of formal schooling. While the estimated gross enrollment rate is about seventy four per cent, and almost 65 per cent of them drops out, the large organized system produce an output of only around 25 per cent of the enrolled children who complete the 5-year cycle. Wastage is alarming. On the other hand, out of an estimated 4.80 crore adolescents, youths and adults, representing the most productive age group of population, about 3.40 crore are illiterate. A historical review of the past efforts indicate that in the last thirty years from 1951-51 the literacy rate for age group 5-10 increased from 21% to 23.8% i.e. 2.8%. The adult literacy rate (for 15+) was 29.2% in 1981 (last census). The estimated weighted average adult literacy rate is around 31% in 1990 (the ratio between male and female being 40% and 22% respectively).

However, if one looks backward into the world scenario, one finds that not a single country had Universal Primary Education (UPE) some 130 years ago. In France, the law of 1881 abolished fees in all primary schools and the law of 1882 established compulsory attendance. In England, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 laid the foundation upon which elementary education was made compulsory throughout England and Wales and in 1891 fees were abolished in all but a few elementary schools. It took about 32 years to attain Universal Primary Education in England, about 45 years in Sweden. In the Indian sub-continent, under British rule the need for introducing Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) had been voiced time and again in the current century. A bill on CPE was first introduced in the Parliament in 1912, but lost. 78 years later, Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990 was passed in the Parliament of Bangladesh, which came into force from January 1, 1991. While some have expressed the opinion that it would be very difficult to enforce the law and ensure CPE by 2000, others believe that the first step now taken could come much earlier, perhaps under imperfect conditions, and in that case, the literacy and educational situation of Bangladesh would have been much more assuring than it is today. Be that as it may, the effect of the compulsion of primary education will be felt long afterwards. Out of the total population of 11.4 crore, almost 49% are girls and women. The education of girls has long been a weak area in the primary education system of Bangladesh. It is, however, encouraging that the proportion of enrollment of girls at the primary level increased from 36% in 1975 to 37% in 1980, 40% in 1985 and 44% in 1990. Through creation of appropriate opportunities to encourage, persuade and facilitate girls and other disadvantaged groups to attend formal or non-formal schools through appropriate interventions, the gap between the male-female rate of enrollment in the primary schools, and adult literacy rate will be improved. In order to achieve UPE, and literacy within the shortest possible time, the base of development must be retained and expanded. The current enrollment rate of about 74% must be enhanced to about 90% by the year 2000. During the nineties primary education must be made as widespread as possible by making it universal and visibly relevant. Access by itself is not enough.

Opportunities for free primary and basic education are not often availed of if these seem to have no visible and immediate impact on the quality of life of those for whom these are offered. It is, therefore, necessary to design, devise and introduce such education which displays tangible benefits of education. Therefore, side by side with the formal education system, Bangladesh Government's focus should now look towards non formal channels of education. Retention and expansion of the enrolled students will contribute to the success of UPE and literacy. Continued participation by the parents, Parents-Teachers Association (PTA), School Management Committee (SMC) and the communities need to be enthusiastically involved in the vital process of EFA through both formal and non-formal channels. A complex set of factors constraining the progress include general problems like poverty, an elitist education system, lack of proper attitude, weak managerial capacities and above all lack of political will and commitment. Education development in the past was not adequately geared to meet the human development need in a growing economy: It generally followed the pattern of the existing system as it expanded marginally and continued to remain expensive and a donor driven activity. Government unwittingly decided to shoulder the entire responsibility of the primary education at a huge risk. The most unfortunate part is that the society and the community is gradually withdrawing from the supply side of the primary education scene. Education frame, it has remained inadequate and handicapped. Building of physical facilities eat away almost 50 per cent of the formal primary education development activities. Teachers salary support is the major component of recurring expenditure. Creating physical facilities like toilets and drinking water are recent events. Girls are least encouraged in this system. Therefore, to improve the

not be sufficient, however, to meet effectively the basic learning needs of all groups. Greater participation by non-governmental organizations, communities, families and individuals will be pursued. The quality of primary level education must be enhanced. The existing formal system will need to be redesigned to make it adequately responsible to meet the emerging social and economic needs. Both the social and individual goals of education will have to be catered for. The task is uphill. The diversity and changing nature of basic learning needs of children. Youth and adults necessitates broadening and constantly redefining the scope of basic education to include new components. These components should constitute an integrated system to provide complementarity, mutually reinforcing and comparable standards, and they should contribute to creating and developing possibilities for life long learning. First, learning begins at birth, this calls for early childhood care and initial education by informal and non-formal mode through arrangements involving families, communities or institutional programmes, as appropriate. Second, the main delivery system for the basic education of children outside the family is primary schooling (6-10 years). Broadening the base of Universal Primary Education through formal and non-formal means in the 1990s will be the goal of Bangladesh. Implementation of Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990 is considered to be a major strategy for universalizing primary education. Other vehicles for primary education, such as Ebedayee Madrasah, satellite schools, community based instruction, radio, television also can meet the basic learning needs of children. Provided that the same acceptable standards of achievement are applied to all vehicles of primary education, it is possible to encourage such diversity in delivery without creating differential learning effects. The lack of adequate access to schools need not prevent any child from attaining a common educational foundation for life and for further learning. Third, the basic learning needs of youths and adults are diverse and should be met through a variety of delivery systems. Literacy programmes are indispensable because literacy is a necessary skill in itself and the foundation of other life skills. Finally, all available instruments and channels of information, communication, and social action could be used to help convey essential knowledge and education to people on social issues. At the same time, communication media both mass media, and smaller community based formats can be important adjuncts and supports to education and development process. They can be employed within formal education as a means of direct teaching or enrichment, they can provide alternative delivery systems in such contexts as distance education to universalize the basic education system of the country. The 1974 census which defined literacy as the ability to read and write a language and attain minimum numeracy skill, showed that only 25.8% of the population over 15 years of age were literate. According to 1981 census, the rate for the same age group had risen to 29.2% an increase of only 3.4% in seven years. While the number of adult literate increased from over 9 million in 1974 to over 13 million in 1981 (an increase of 42%), the number of illiterates grew from over 27 million to almost 33 million, an increase of almost 20%. Although the adult literacy rate increased to about 31% in 1990, the total number of illiterates in the country still stands at an alarming figure. The fact that the literacy rate is still around 30 per cent coupled with the fact that UPE through the formal system is not, according to current plans, going to be achieved before the turn of the century, means that alternatives have to be provided. The educational needs of those children who do not enrol in formal primary schools and who will continue to drop out, or those youths and adults who have been unable to avail of educational opportunities in the past cannot be ignored. In fact, with the increasing emphasis that has been given to UPE during the last two plan periods (1980-85) and (1985-90), only limited non-formal activities (adult education programme) were conducted to complement the formal system. While some of the NGO activities truly reflected the adult literacy programme, unplanned proliferation of such efforts without any standardization, lack of clear policy guidelines by the government, the outcome has so far been rather limited and insignificant. Therefore, a renewed national commitment would be needed to support the concept of less organized and more flexible non-formal education as a viable complement to the formal system to help improve the adult literacy from the existing thirty per cent to about fifty per cent by the year 2000. The author is the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Education.

Despite increased allocations since the First Plan for primary education, out of the total outlay for education sector, Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme has neither performed satisfactorily nor progressed significantly.

Nuruddin M. Kamal

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