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THE remarkable political unity for ending the dictatorship of General Ershad in December 1990 and the disunity during and after the general election in February 1991 in Bangladesh have surprised many an outside observer. But to any one familiar with the geography and history of the country, it was not so very unexpected.

The region now called Bangladesh (old Banga and Barendra), like the Pakastoon and Baluch region of the west, is on the borderland of the Indian sub-continent. It has been much more exposed to foreign contacts, foreign racial mixture and foreign ideas than the heartland of the sub-continent.

With the hilly and jungle terrain in the east and north, the turbulent sea and swampy forest in the south, the very big and erosion-prone rivers in the centre and west, it is subject to severe natural hazards like floods and cyclones. At the same time, the soil is mostly fertile and water is plentiful. Crop production has traditionally been relatively easy. This has resulted in rather fast growth of population.

Hazardous life and pressure of population have made the people of Bangladesh much more individualistic, emotional, willing to migrate and face hardship, more rough of speech but warm in heart, more aggressive but hospitable, more quick-tempered but easily mollified and more ready to revolt against authority and yet appreciative of generous gestures than some of their neighbours. A large number of leaders of thought and action, rebels and militants and fighters for nationalism as well as sectarianism have come from this region.

Traditionally, the people of Bangladesh have been attracted by what the old Pandits used to call Bam Marga (left path) in the broader sense of the term. But there were also periodical reactions to the right especially when some demagogue succeed in exciting their emotions. But even then they reacted violently mainly as a crowd and their personal behaviour was usually remarkably friendly even to an opponent. Tantra against Veda, casteless Buddhism and Vaishnavism against caste-ridden Brahminism, egalitarian Islam against hierarchical Hinduism, Sufism against religious intolerance, militantism against foreign hegemony, strong attachment to their own language against the imposition of the language of an alien ruler and democracy against dictatorship (e.g. from Gopal of eighth century to modern times) mark the history of Bangladesh. Recent rebels in Bangladesh have many predecessors from the earliest times. Their factionalism also has deep roots in the basic character of the people, which is closer to the emotional, logical-end seeking Latin type than the phlegmatic, compromise seeking

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Bangladesh : Retrospect and Prospect

Anglo-Saxon type.

The anti-Ershad revolution that took place in Bangladesh in December 1990 should not, therefore, be seen in isolation. It has many precedents in the anti-Pakistan revolution of 1971, the pro-Bengali language agitation of the fifties, the anti-India (but pro-United Bengal) movement of the forties, the anti-British militantism of the thirties, the anti-Bengal partition movement of 1905, the wars of Isa Khan, Pratapaditya and other Bhuiyans against the Mughals, the Bengali Muslim rulers' fights against the Sultanate of Delhi and the Bengali Buddhist kings' wars against the Emperors of Aryavarta.

Yet this borderland has also felt throughout history a close affinity to the rest of the sub-continent. Witness the Sanskritisation as well as Islamisation of large masses of its people, the spread of Buddhism, Vaishnavism and Sufism and the influence of political parties like the All-India Congress and the All-India Muslim League.

It is also worth noting that unlike in the Pakistan region, Islam spread in the Bangladesh region not by the conversion of Hindus through the power of the sword but mainly by the voluntary conversion of Buddhists through the preachings of Muslim missionaries who came by sea at a critical time when the decadent Buddhists were fighting a rear guard struggle against the resurgent Hinduism of the victorious Sen kings. The dedicated Buddhists found the egalitarian message of Islam more acceptable than the caste-ridden system of the Hindus. Bangladeshi nationalism has much deeper roots than is commonly thought.

It is, however, interesting to note, in the modern context that although Bangladesh fought against the domination of both Delhi and Islamabad, it took the lead in establishing the SAARC and in persuading both reluctant India and Pakistan to join it.

These are some of the basic facts which need to be kept in view by all those who are interested in the future development of the sub-continent on peaceful and co-operative lines. The underlying cross-currents of the centrifugal and centripetal forces in the sub-continent and the impact on them of various influences from outside, whether of trade, industry, religion or ideology, need to be carefully

Samar Ranjan Sen, one of India's more prominent economists and political thinkers, wrote this article back in February, 1990 and provided readers of the Calcutta-based Economic and Political Weekly with as good an insight into the socio-political past and present of Bangladesh as one hoped to find. This was perhaps not so surprising, since the personal and family roots of Dr. S. R. Sen are firmly embedded into the soil of this country. Dr. Sen began his academic career at the University of Dhaka in the 1940s, after becoming the first doctorate of economics of the institution once known as Oxford of the East. His mother, Ashalta Sen, served as a member of the legislative assembly of first Bengal, and then East Pakistan from 1946 up to 1955. In between, S. R. Sen had to leave his native country in 1948 for India and begin a glittering career in the fields of economics and administration, which included terms as an Executive Director of the World Bank for India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka until 1978. The article is reproduced under a special arrangement with the author.

studied. Any attempt to impose a Procrustean model, so convenient or appealing for a dictator, a general or a bureaucracy, will be misleading; counter-productive and short-lived. It needs to be appreciated that many districts, religious denominations, racial and dialect groups in Bangladesh have larger numbers of people than more than half the member countries of the UN. It is only through meaningful autonomy for different tiers of government from the village and town mohalla upwards in a decentralised system that the people can be given a satisfac-

tory sense of participation in governance in a country with such a large population as Bangladesh. The replacement of the hierarchical command system, inherent in a dictatorship or Afro-Asian type presidential system (without separation of powers), by a decentralised co-operative system as in a true democracy may not, however, be easy in Bangladesh. Many people there in the army, civil service, politics and business still look back with some wistfulness to the regime that Ayub Khan had set up in Pakistan. Its apparent simplicity and orderliness are contrasted

with the rather complex and less orderly processes of democracy. The problems of a Westminster system of government which East Pakistan faced between 1947 and 1958 and Bangladesh itself faced between 1972 and 1974 (partly due to the individualist and emotional character of the people), make some important people in authority averse to its reintroduction in the country. But there are some others who feel that the Afro-Asian type presidential system, which is the basic feature of the present constitution of Bangladesh, is very prone to lapse into civil or military dic-

tatorship as was the experience in 1975 and 1982. It should not be forgotten that the senior officers of the Bangladesh army have inherited the traditions of the Pakistan army, of which they were part up to 1971. It is their support which made possible and sustained the authoritarian regimes of both Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad. While Ziaur Rahman (otherwise a capable and personally honest man) ruthlessly eliminated army officers who opposed his regime and paid the price for this by being assassinated, Ershad (a clever but less honest man) bought up

many of his opponents and experimented with various manipulations.

It needs to be emphasised that Ershad fell not only because of a popular upsurge against his regime. He had successfully suppressed several such upsurges during the last nine years so long as he enjoyed loyal support from the army. He fell because by December 1990 there was a generation gap within the army itself and the younger officers (who did not have the Ayub Khan tradition of their seniors) had a closer rapport with their own generation of student leaders who spearheaded the revolt against General Ershad belonging to the older generation. It was only when Ershad learnt that the young army officers were likely to go against him that he decided to surrender power and risk a general election. He had, of course, also a fond hope that he would be able to get back some public support by his resignation and prepare the ground for a future political career.

Bangladesh has one advantage over India (and also Pakistan and Sri Lanka) in having a more homogeneous population, although there is considerable regional and class conflict. But the people being individualistic and emotional presents some problems. Both in regard to the electoral and constitutional systems, there is the same kind of dissatisfaction as obtains in India. But because of its peculiarities, Bangladesh would have to evolve its own remedies. It may, however, learn useful lessons by studying also the experience of other countries instead of going by its own political cross-currents alone.

As regards the electoral system, the problems which have been faced and the possible remedies which are currently being debated in India may, therefore, be of some topical interest for Bangladesh. Measures for strengthening the autonomy and authority of the Election Commission, empowering it to enforce a minimum democracy and accountability within the registered political parties, curbing the number of 'non-serious' candidates, imposing effective physical limits to unnecessary and undesirable use of money power and manpower for election purposes and perhaps introducing an independent joint electorate system for discouraging extremist sectarian approaches in electioneering

may be as much needed in Bangladesh as in India.

As regards the system of government, the election results are such that no basic change of the present Constitution may be feasible in Bangladesh unless the two major parties, the BNP and BAL, agree to be more flexible than in the recent past and explore in a co-operative spirit whether in the long-term interest of the country (as distinct from the short-term interest of the government) there is a possible new alternative which deserves earnest consideration. The NBP would do well to discuss with the other major parties, with an open mind, what amendments of the present Constitution are needed to ensure that the emergency powers cannot be used at discretion by the president alone to convert the government directly or indirectly into some sort of dictatorship once again in future. The Awami League should also discuss similarly with the BNP what kind of safeguards against undue factionalism, defection and instability of government, need to be provided in the 1972 Constitution, if it is to be revived. Both should agree to look beyond the Pakistani and Westminster systems to some other systems, e.g. Sweden (for Ombudsman), West Germany (for constructive no-confidence motion), USA (for separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers) and Switzerland (for co-operative government co-existing with confrontation in legislature in a multi-party democracy).

A time has come, after more than four decades of painful trial and error, for Bangladesh (and also some other countries of this region) to consider very seriously whether to go on trying inflexibly and again only the two familiar but counter-productive alternatives, viz. the presidential system (without separation of powers) and the parliamentary system (without the basic codes of conduct) or to evolve a third alternative. After the revolution of December 1990 which has swept away many debris of the past, Bangladesh has today a golden opportunity to do this not only for its own benefit but also for setting an example for the other countries of South Asia who are also groping for a more satisfactory system.

Of course, until the present Constitution is amended, and in the absence of a national coalition, government in Bangladesh will have to operate on the usual confrontational lines and continue to face the same kind of problems that it faced in the past. But the political parties which worked together in making the revolution of December 1990 successful may seriously consider forging once again now a consensus approach in framing a new Constitution for the country which may ensure a more co-operative and less confrontational system of government in future.



Processionists rejoicing fall of Ershad

A NEWS AGENCY CELEBRATES TWENTYFIVE YEARS Tiny, Lean and Filling the World's Papers

GEMINI News Service became 25 years old on January 1.

In many parts of the world today Gemini is a household name, read almost daily and admired for its insight into international affairs.

In organisation it remains tiny and lean. But it fills hundreds of columns of space every week all over the world and it boasts a bigger string of correspondents than the largest newspapers. Gemini news-features with their strikingly original graphics appear in more than 70 countries.

The correspondent of The People's Daily in Beijing, recently arrived in Harare as the first representative of his paper to be accredited to South Africa, declared himself totally familiar with Gemini when he saw it daily in the Zimbabwe Herald because he had been reading it for years in the English-language China Daily back home.

Gemini was born in Wheatstee House, Carmelite Street, off London's Fleet Street, on January 1 1967. It had a staff of three journalists — the two founders, Derek Ingram, who had been Deputy Editor of the Daily Mail, and Oliver Carruthers, a journalist from Zimbabwe, and a Sri Lankan journalist, whose name, curiously, was Gemini (not Gemini) Seneviratne.

On a Gestetner offset machine they produced a service of about a dozen news reports a week that were rather different from what had gone before. They were from correspondents overseas who were not British, but nationals of the countries they were writing about.

The first piece Gemini put out was an interview with Indira Gandhi by Kuldip Nayer, who was later to become one of India's most famous and controversial political journalists and was, a year or two ago, for a short time Indian High Commissioner in London. Another report in the first batch was about the pork-knockers of Guyana by a Guyanese editor called Carl Blackman.

Gemini was born within the framework of the Commonwealth. The original concept was to help bring about a better interchange of in-depth news reports between Commonwealth countries. More news of Zambia would reach India, more of India would reach Canada and so forth.

Gemini was to do much more than that, however. It was to provide the newspapers of these countries with something more appropriate than the syndicated material they were then getting from the

British and American press — almost wholly reports written by western journalists for western readers.

Well into the Seventies papers in place like Sarawak and Sri Lanka were publishing syndicated items from the London Sun and Daily Express about events in Truro and Aberystwyth and Kincardine that were meaningless to their readers.

Gemini was about the decolonisation of news, and it soon became apparent that its timing was right. Nearly every major country of what had till recently been the British Empire was now independent, and the appeal of material from an alternative source that was in tune with the needs of these new countries was immediate. In quite a short time papers in many developing countries — but also in places like Canada and New Zealand took up the service.

Soon after its launch Gemini began to develop graphics. The style was devised by Cliff Hopkinson, former production editor of the London Observer, then associate editor of the Daily Mail and now Deputy Editor of US News and World Report in Washington. It was distinctive and its main features have been retained to this day. Gemini became famous for

its graphics long before the computer age made them so fashionable with the western press. It was a pioneer in the field and in the years between seven Gemini artists have moved on — been poached, says Ingram, is the more appropriate term — to British national newspapers or agencies. Signs of the influence of the Gemini graphics style are evident in papers all over the world today.

Soon after launch it became apparent that Gemini must sell its copy and cover events in countries outside as well as within the Commonwealth. That it has long done, and today Gemini is to be found all over the Middle East, in remote Pacific Isles, and now even in Bulgaria and Poland. All this has been accomplished on a tiny budget and staff and even now almost all the copy is despatched by air-mail from its small office near the Angel, Islington.

For much of the Seventies Gemini became a part of the Guardian Group, operating out of the Manchester Evening News office in Fleet Street, but in 1982 it became wholly independent again and was set up on a more international basis. News Concern International Foundation was formed with governors from nine countries.

They include the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, former Commonwealth Secretary-General Arnold Smith of Canada, Guardian Publications Ltd, and Trinidad-born London newscaster Trevor McDonald, who is now the chairman of the board.

Gemini News Service is owned by the Foundation, whose deed entrenches its editorial independence.

Derek Ingram, who started his journalistic career with the Daily Sketch in 1942, moved to the Daily Express and then served for 17 years in a variety of executive positions on the Daily Mail, still edits Gemini.

During his 25 years at Gemini he has spent an average of three months a year overseas, mostly in Africa and Asia, reporting and promoting Gemini from the Honiara to Bangalore and from Oaborone to Bangkok.

In recent years Gemini has become increasingly involved in helping to broaden the horizons of overseas journalists. Over the last few years 15 Canadian journalists have joined the Gemini office on fellowships and attachments while others have come from Africa and Asia.

With special funding, it has placed local journalists in developing countries in rural areas for two-month stays.

a day in the life of...

GEMINI NEWS SERVICE

Journalists, being mostly based in urban areas, get little chance to find out what is going on in the countryside, especially in countries with poor communications systems.

The exercise has now been carried out in 14 countries and has produced much offbeat copy. As part of this exercise Gemini produced a rural reporting manual.

Gemini now plans to put more accent on environmental reporting and will produce a similar manual on that subject. It has organised seminars for Asian and African journalists in Kuala Lumpur, Harare and Accra on rural and environmental reporting.

Gemini General Manger Bethel Njoku says Gemini has been unique in its efforts to bridge the media gap between the developing and industrialised worlds.

He adds: 'It has made an international impact out of all proportion to its size and despite the continued overwhelming predominance of the big agencies. And it has won respect for its integrity over a quarter of a century. We are proud of our achievement as we plan for our next quarter century.'



AN ACCOUNT TO MAKE OUT Bethel Njoku



A FACT TO CHECK Gillian Forrester



A STORY TO TAP IN Dipu Ouedrini



A STORY TO DISCUSS Derek Ingram and Deyo Thussu



A STORY TO REPORT Alex Norris



A DRAWING UNDERWAY Nick O'Toole