

Sidelights from Conversation with the Finance Minister; a Gentle Side of Sheikh Hasina; and Some Tips for Autograph Collectors

THE success of our "Conversation" pieces lies in The Daily Star team being able to ask its questions freely, without too much of advance preparation, and, what's more, in the interviewee providing his or her responses with the same freedom as we use in conducting the exercise.

We have no problem in following these groundrules with our politicians — with those we have met so far anyway — who are pleased to see their views reported extensively in direct narration, instead of being abridged drastically. It is always a bit of a shock to a politician to see his or her three-page long speech being reduced to two paragraphs and published on the bottom of an inside page of a newspaper. When the same politician becomes a minister, the treatment of the three-page long speech improves considerably, but, I suspect, it is still below the expectation of the person concerned.

Whatever Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman expected out of his "Conversation" with The Daily Star, which, as we had alerted him, would get a full-page treatment, his co-operation turned the exercise into a success, as you can judge from the piece published elsewhere in today's paper.

The best part of the exercise was that if we, from The Daily Star, did not run out of questions, the Minister had virtually inexhaustible replies which came promptly — often a little too promptly — leaving me wondering if our questions had been little too naive, little too simple for a finance minister — any finance minister — of Bangladesh.

As expected, Minister's replies were not without some Saifur Rahman-type expressions which were either too forthright or a little abrasive, making me recall a remark he had recently made to the London Economist that none of his cabinet colleagues understood market economy and that the Prime Minister was his only supporter.

During his conversation with us, he did not go that far — frankly speaking, I wish, he did — but he kept referring to other ministries as "line ministries" (whatever that might mean), although he stopped short of describing the Ministry of Finance as the pivotal one, the centre-piece of the whole administration. Of course, as you will read in the report, he had no hesitation in criticising the so-called line ministries for being too slow in using their development funds — "Money is no problem", he said once, repeating an expression from one of the statements of the late president

Ziaur Rahman — blasted the private sector for its "failures" and criticised the government for being too large, expensive and cumbersome.

After listening to the Finance Minister for over an hour, I could see why it is said that the growing resentment Saifur Rahman has evoked among politicians is in sharp contrast to his rising popularity among the no-nonsense technocrats of aid agencies and that for every friend he wins, he turns two old admirers into his adversaries.

At the end of our meeting, I complimented the Finance Minister for being most forthright

and articulate. That is your strength — and your problem," I added and, indeed, meant what I said.

What pleased me was that our youngsters — maybe fewer than in our student days — still collect autographs and perhaps even stamps and old coins, contrary to my fear that these wonderful hobbies have disappeared in this age of videos.

After all these decades, I recall my own autograph-hunting and stamp-collecting days with nostalgia, even with a touch of pride.

What made my autograph-collecting hobby into an exciting exercise was that I went for

through Southeast Asia.

So, here is an idea for autograph collectors. Turn your simple hobby into something exciting, something creative, and you will have a treasure in your possession.

DURING the concluding session of the seminar organised by "Women for Women", we had a rare glimpse of a gentle side of Sheikh Hasina, the Chief Guest at the function.

I am told that like the BNP leader, Dr Badruddo Chowdhury who had opened the seminar two days earlier, Hasina had a signal from the organisers to avoid a partisan approach and to discuss the role of women in politics, without being involved in local power struggle between the two major parties.

The Awami League leader accepted the signal and I must say, did a very good job when she delivered her address.

Hasina spoke about problems facing women and specifically about what the country should do to promote literacy among our mothers and sisters, without making any criticisms of the government policies.

Then, speaking extempore, she started talking about herself, how she grew up in a political atmosphere as a school student, knowing, at the back of her mind that one day she would be a worker for the Awami League. Speaking slowly, almost in a conversational tone, she said how she became involved in bringing up her children and political activities were pushed to the background.

Then, after a pause she referred to some "tragic incidents" in her life — she was talking about the killing of her father, without using such words as assassination or murder — which brought her back to politics.

It was here that she made a statement that she had probably never before made from a platform. She said, "Some tragic incidents in our lives, in mine, and of Begum Khaleida Zia and Mrs Bandanika of Sri Lanka brought us to politics and put us at the heads of our political parties, an unforeseen development that we were not ready for."

The Awami League leader thus came as close as possible to saying that none of the three was equipped to face up to the challenge produced by unexpected but tragic incidents in their respective lives.

I complimented Hasina on her speech when she returned to her seat. She responded with a smile. It was a gracious smile.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

and articulate. That is your strength — and your problem," I added and, indeed, meant what I said.

THE other day, I enjoyed the unexpected privilege of signing as many as three autograph books of young students of a local women's college, all smartly dressed as cadets and acting as guards at the concluding session of the seminar on "Women and Politics". The meeting was organised by "Women for Women."

The honour shown to me took me a bit by surprise — after all, I am no celebrity of any sort — and all I could do was just to sign my name in Bangla, without any sermon. Surely, I could have at least said, "Read The Daily Star every day."

Why was I shown this unexpected honour? I got the answer rather slowly.

Invited to the concluding session of the seminar as the "Guest of Honour", as distinct from the Chief Guest (CG) and Special Guest (SG), whatever the differences may be, I sat on the dais, next to the Awami League chairperson Sheikh Hasina, the Chief Guest. As it often happens when a journalist and a politician sit together, there was the inevitable whispered conversation, seemingly highly confidential but of little consequence, or news value as such.

So, after getting the autograph of Sheikh Hasina, the three girls turned to me, out of

writers, poets, and painters. I made them either write a few lines or draw a sketch for me. So many of them readily obliged.

I was still in my teens when I got a page of my autograph book filled by a poem by Jasimuddin, an original one written especially for me. It was also a beautiful one which I read many times and learnt it by heart. After all these years, I can still recite it word for word, which I will do one day for Jasimuddin's daughter Hasna Moudud or any of the close relatives of the late poet.

Then, a few years later, I paid a visit to Santiniketan and, without any appointment, walked into the house where the great artist, Nandalal Basu lived.

I was luckily enough to find him in the living room, sitting all by himself. I took off my shoes, entered the room and bowed to the artist who, due to his old age, then received few visitors. I certainly had the right approach.

"Sir, will you please draw something for my autograph book?" I asked a little hesitantly, without appearing to be asking for a favour.

Basu took my autograph book and drew a sketch of two Santal girls plucking some fruits from a tree, a common enough sight in Santiniketan. And then signed it.

Eventually, I got a few other artists to draw sketches or simple line drawings in my precious little autograph book. It was indeed precious — and I lost it together with several letters of Uncle Mujtaba Ali, during my travels

sortum meeting in Paris you would be asking for less than two billion? You certainly have a target? How do you reduce your aid requirement year by year?

SR: I really would like to ask for less. But I could tell you also that love-hate relationship with aid that I have mentioned earlier on.

This year there was an interim country report of the World Bank which mentioned that they might recommend 1900 million dollars, and I could see from every newspaper that they were saying that the World Bank would recommend 1.9 billion, while it was 2.2 or 2.3 billion in the previous year.

I was happy, because it was what I was always aiming for. Because last year I told the Parliament that I shall attain 14 per cent self-reliant development process in the first year. I said in the 2nd year I would go to 25 and 3rd year 35 per cent. That is my target. And the people of the country want greater self-reliance effort. If I ask for increasing aid, then what would happen to my effort for economic self-reliance?

DS: Can you give us any target?

SR: Yes, by 1995, if we continue as we are now continuing under this normal rule of democracy, domestic contribution to the development budget will be to the extent of 35 per cent.

However, this year, while my target was 14, we have reached a reliance rate of 24 per cent in a single year. In this way we will not only achieve 35 per cent by 1995, I think if we are allowed perfect democratic stability and good law and order atmosphere, and the confidence of the outsider about the hospitable environment in Bangladesh in terms of the social peace and tranquility, then I think we can even achieve a self reliance rate of even 40 per cent.

DS: Yes, but will it mean reduction of assistance from outside? Because you are talking of 40 per cent of the domestic mobilisation matched with the assistance from outside. But will it mean external aid coming down to, say 1.5 billion, by 1995?

SR: Yes, certainly, because the more I can raise internally, the less I shall have to depend on others. Why should I mortgage my posterity for investment today? Already we have an external debt liability of US\$12 billion and 12 billion is 55 per cent or almost 50 per cent of our GDP Gross Domestic Product. And I should say, that we should stop before it reaches two-thirds of our GDP and that is our maximum limit.

DS: You said that there would be 24 per cent internal expenditure on the annual development programme (ADP) this year. But you have also said that the total expenditure will be 400 crore taka less than the target. Spending less

than the budget target on current account expenditure may be a good thing, but wouldn't you consider it a really bad thing to have spent so much less in the development budget, rather than exceeding it?

SR: A budget is a budget. The difference between the target and our achievement is only six per cent with the ADP. Even if you remain in a 10 per cent plus or minus within your budgetary target, even then the budget is a good one, frankly speaking.

But I am not satisfied. With this 7,100 crore or 7,500 I think is an excellent target and there's no question of exceeding it in a cyclone-drawn, flood-drawn, devastated new administration. I would say we have done excellently. With due humbleness I would say that none with these sort of difficulties and with the transition to a new governmental machinery could have done so.

I can spend 700 crore more within 30th of June. Yet my line ministries could not use it effectively. Finance is no problem. I am the Finance Minister. I can write a cheque for 700 crore and still have no deficit finance.

But the capability of the line ministries is a different mat-

ter. That is an inherent problem of Bangladesh's development. Our main problem of development are project identification, project implementation, monitoring capability. These are few common difficulties and areas of incompetence inherent even from the early 80s. It has only multiplied during the Ershad regime.

When you go from one-man rule and the centralisation of power to decentralisation, the line ministries cannot operate well. They wait for the orders from the top. But there is no top now. It is a collective responsibility. We are giving more responsibility to the line ministries and by that they will have a lot more to do and become more vital than ever.

DS: We were not really thinking in terms of fund shortage, but in terms of implementation of the projects ...

SR: I told you earlier, implementation gap or deficiency still persists and it will continue to persist in my standard of judgement. It should be improved much faster.

Bangladesh's current problem is not finance. It is proper management. Management capability, project identification

and implementation capability are the three sectors which are hampering our development endeavour by failing to make proper usage of the aid money.

Actually domestic resources should be the area in which we should all direct our attention. We do not only need efficient engineers, doctors, accountants, but we need good managers. At the moment, we are seriously lacking in good and efficient managers both in the private and public sectors.

DS: Are you going to present us with what is known as a 'soft' budget or a 'hard' budget this year?

SR: I really cannot say whether it will be a soft or hard budget. Usually any budget presented by the Finance Minister is considered a 'hard' budget from every other quarter of the society. Even if it is in his opinion a soft budget, they consider it hard. So I do not really know, it depends on people's perception.

DS: Looking back at the previous year, are you satisfied about your achievements in the financial sector?

SR: Yes, I am more or less satisfied. But I am not satisfied with the micro-sector performance.

If the micro-sectors worked with more resilience and vigor, I think we could have achieved 7,500 taka disbursement on the ADP, which you mentioned earlier. Because fund shortage was not the point. I had funds which I could not spend. This is my frustration, not only frustration but anger also with the agencies.

Otherwise as far as the macro-management is concerned I am very satisfied. Because the inflation rate is only 5.5 per cent. It is not only my assessment but the Mission Chief of the World Bank complemented me for achieving this low inflationary rate and he said it was an excellent performance for a country like ours.

We have managed in the last year of the ESAF programme and we have managed excellently. Not only that, we have so much foreign exchange at the moment, but the private sectors are not coming forward to use the foreign exchange. They are setting a target now for retaining a foreign reserve of five months of our import requirement, which is far too excessive.

But they are saying now, that since your economy is maturing enough to go in from a marginal requirement to a mid-term requirement. Three months are for the poorer nations. But for the relatively richer or well-off nations, it is not three months.

Three month's requirement may not also be adequate. It may be enough. But not adequate in the sense that if suddenly our country is overtaken by flood, drought or cyclone in the present aid-climate of the world, then suddenly you have to go through a lot of accidental import of food grains, edibles and other major necessities. So I think it is not adequate.

DS: As we have leaned from outside, sir, is that one of our major factories is not working efficiently because of over-

staffing. Now you are telling us categorically that there is no question of any retrenchment and you are planning to allow them voluntary retirement which is also expensive and it seems that basically it is a status quo situation.

SR: No it is not a status quo situation. As I see it, it is a man power rehabilitation programme. Retrenchment is when you force people to retire. The excess in the jute sector, where separate study and separate programme have already been done, if the people working go into retirement voluntarily, then that will be a number sufficient enough to pay for us for their voluntary retirement. At this stage, frankly speaking, I think there is no need for retrenchment. Because retrenchment involves compulsion.



"I am disguised in the manner in which government offices run. Say, civil service."

DS: We interviewed you when your first became the Finance Minister. Then you had stressed on the need to reduce the government. You expressed your feeling that it was over-extended in respect of the number of employees, buildings and bureaus and departments, many of which offer very little services. What do you think of it now?

SR: Now I feel more stronger and worse about it than I had pointed out last time.

I think government is the worst institution. We all would have been better off if it was possible to eliminate these institutions for good. Wherever the government puts its hand, something goes wrong there. It would have been better if people could have been allowed to run their own affairs.

I am disguised in the manner in which government offices run. Say, civil service. I tell you, I am absolutely amazed by the way it runs. It is absolutely status quo oriented. Unless you tell them, they will do nothing. There is no drive or initiative and enthusiasm. This is one of the reason why our development programme fails its target. Not because of the lack of finance, but greatly because of the lack of enthusiasm and initiative from the civil administration for project planning, project processing and project implementation.

DS: Thank you Mr. Rahman, for your time.

Rising Star

The Rising Star will be published on Saturday. We regret the inconvenience caused to our young readers.

Conversation

privatisation, government will continue to play a dominant role in providing infrastructure, manpower resources, development power resources, health programme and law and order etc.

Now in this context we have to be choosy, because people outside often say that donors impose certain conditions when giving us aid. But I think it is a misnomer. Except on one or two areas it is a misnomer and I think it is unkind also in some areas to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. For instance in the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facilities (ESAF) programme aided by IMF, what they are saying is — you reduce your current expenditure, you increase your savings, increase investment, reduce your deficit, reduce the inflationary situation. Any good and sensible government would be ready to do all that.

"I think the government is the worst institution...wherever the government puts its hand, something goes wrong there. It would have been better if people could have been allowed to run their affairs than relying on the government."

DS: But does it not also include conditions such as abolition of import restrictions, doing away with agricultural subsidy?

SR: Now, I was coming to this. We have agricultural subsidy on certain items and that certain items involve irrigation.

In irrigation the government has to help them, because irrigation involves much larger investment in terms of the affordability of our farmers. Say, a shallow tubewell costs 18,000 taka, so it is impossible for a small farmer to invest that amount into irrigation. So this is an area where we are already contending with them, and saying, in irrigation I do not agree with you.

I provide irrigation to my people, otherwise there can not be a winter crop and Bangladesh's future lies in the winter crop from the ground water or surface water, whatever the irrigation may be. That is the key to Bangladesh's agricultural development.

In the distribution and delivery of agricultural fertilizer, seed, insecticide and pesticides, the private sector can do a much better job and they have demonstrated their efficiency in the last three years of private business.

So when they say you eliminate subsidy they have their reasons. Because they object to the idea of allowing subsidy on our agriculture with their taxpayer's money. They say, do it with your own money. That is their point and I frankly do not



trade never prospers anywhere.

What is needed is that, we have to be given a respite.

Our industries are gradually developing and we cannot complete with the mature industries of the world, because in industrialisation we are lagging behind the developed countries of the world in many respects.

However in Bangladesh, I could see that the this "childhood" seems to be prolonging far too much.

Take the plastic industry for example. There is not a single reason why our people should carry a plastic bucket when they return from a visit to India. Good plastic baskets should at least have been made locally by now.

Another reason is this, excessive protection is not good and did not prove good in any countries which followed it. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka followed protective trade; all these countries are lagging far behind countries like Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong which followed an open market economy.

What we want here to do is, we want to have a judicious mixture of tariff with a free liberalisation programme. We do not want to go to the extent of ruining our upcoming industries, while at the same time, we do not want excessive protection that even at the age of 40 they will act like children.

DS: Do you have, at the back of your mind, any feeling that next time in the aid con-

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I was a student of English Department of DU and had to discontinue my studies because of a neurological disease I have been afflicted with for the last five years. A year ago I fell in love with a girl and she responded although knowing about my illness. I told her right from the beginning that she cannot share her life with me till I recovered. She has tried her best but I have not improved. Because of this I am no more interested to continue relations with her. Moreover, my parents don't like her also. She is not willing to listen to any reason. Presently we are not in touch though, she tries to call me sometimes. What should I do, please advise.

D. Hossain, Dhaka

Dear Hossain,

It seems you have other reasons for cutting off relations with her than just your illness. I don't think you are interested in her any longer and the reasons you now give are just excuses. Making a commitment to spend the life together is a very serious one and should be based on very solid understanding and respect for each other. If you are no longer interested in continuing relations with her then you should tell her directly and frankly and not give excuses such as your illness, her stubbornness and your parents' attitude.

Dear Mita,

Following the trace of an anonymous in May 15 issue of your "MITA" section, I want to say that same thing has happened in my life. I fell in love with my cousin (uncle's daughter) and we plunged so madly in love that we never think of being apart and want to get married. Both of our families know nothing about our affair. I think, when the question of marriage will arise, then there will be problem. I don't care for the social barriers and our family relationships, but worry about our postmarriage affair. I was acquainted with a couple who were cousins. The wife gave birth to an abnormal child. Doctor says that it happens because of her parent's blood. Is there any biological explanation about that? Please, Mita, help me out. Another thing, would you mind telling your real name? Eagerly waiting for your reply.

Mosil, Dhaka

Dear Mosil,

I am afraid it is true that, marriage among coming cousins does sometimes produce abnormal offspring. One cannot be 100% accurate but there is a slight risk. To overcome this

problem, couples can take a blood test prior to starting a family. With modern medicine and diagnosis, anything abnormal can be detected very early. It is preferable that cousins don't marry each other but if you feel so strongly about each other, then go ahead. Just be aware of the problem which might arise, and have the strength to face it.

Dear Mita,

We have been married for five years and have two children. My husband is a very kind and gentle person but very uncompromising when he is angry. It takes him a long time to get over his anger and when I complain the situation gets worse. What should I do? It causes strain and friction in the relationship.

Shefali, Narayanganj

Dear Shefali,

There are many people who cannot recover from an unpleasant incident as promptly as others do. This is a personality trait and very hard to change. The worst thing you can do is point it out just when he is angry. If it does not upset you to much just let it pass for the moment. Bring it up later, in a more congenial atmosphere. Discuss the event that led to the unpleasantness in a frank non-threatening and nonaccusing way. This will not change him overnight, but over the years will certainly have some good effects.

Dear Mita,

Recently, I have been losing a lot of hair to the extent that I might become bald soon. What can I do? I had such beautiful hair, but it started shedding since I was 16 and now I am 29. Is there any remedy? I have consulted many doctors but it has not helped. What do you suggest?

Dipu Dhaka

Dear Dipu,

Losing hair has become a very common phenomenon, not only among men but women too, and now a days we do come across semi-bald women. The reason is a mixture of heredity, food habits, weather and care. Our doctor says: Since the hair cells are made of protein, a high protein diet often helps. Hair loss is also due to excessive tension or taking of strong medicine. Sometimes vitamin A and D have been known to be helpful.