

Calcutta Once Again: Still Safe after Dusk

The Biman flight was quite punctual but the time of arrival at the Calcutta airport was far from ideal, a hot and humid mid-day in early June. Monsoon provided it goes by the book, should be round the corner, but before that happens, it can be extremely uncomfortable, and it was. To add to the misery, the half-an-hour flight — was it an ATP aircraft? I didn't notice — was marred by two factors: one: my daughter's seat was fixed in an upright position as the knob controlling the movement of the seat forward and backward was missing; two: a little later, passengers occupying window-seats, many of them, experienced a dripping roof. Stewardesses were seen busy trying, with paper handkerchiefs, to plug the leaking pipes. The double inconvenience left my daughter so irritated that she didn't touch the snacks, and we got down to an immigration area where the people behind the counters appeared to be living in a world where all the clocks have come to a stop.

Once through the Customs, we confronted more cheerful faces offering, in scarcely subdued tones, exchange for dollars. As we moved on unheedingly, there was yet another who, quite nonchalantly took over the trolley and offered to take us to the taxi. Ignoring the taxi-line, he took us to a place where a rickety private car stood in wait for us. We saw the game at once, and insisted that he take us to a taxi proper. He obliged us, grudgingly though, but I tipped him all the same. I did not like my visit to start on a wrong note.

Calcutta, though alien now for long forty-five years, is still, to me, the most familiar of all the world's cities. Physical proximity, cultural closeness,

and linguistic oneness, — these are the factors which take away half the worries associated with unfamiliarity. I am one of those who knew the Calcutta of pre-Partition years fairly well without being a Calcutta by birth or residence. But long absence and infrequency of visits have put a haze on a familiar scene. Without a taxi, I should feel lost in the city. My first experience with Calcutta's Metro hash put a new confidence into my timid heart and I hope and pray that the Metro grows and moves out in all directions of the city. On my first acquaintance, I more than liked Calcutta's Metro. The contrast with London's Underground was striking, to say the least. The absence of advertisements was a relief; but the directions which make London's Underground a foolproof system were scanty, in Calcutta Metro, I felt it at the Park Street landing point. There were several outlets, without any indication as to which outlet will take you to which street. Calcutta's Metro is doubly welcome: it is an additional facility for Calcutta's travelling millions; and on top of every thing, it is an escape from the heat, the dirt and squalor of the city overhead.

Our own city Dhaka has the distinction of being the first city in the world with a claim to have the worst public transportation. Those who live in Dhaka and often visit Calcutta, shopping being the main motive, come back, many of them, with a feeling of superiority. They are the people who move in their own, foreign made, cars. They are the people who have their smug existence in the newer, brighter parts of Dhaka, and for whom the older Dhaka hardly exists. The separation between the old and new, in our city, is complete. Not so in Calcutta, where the

whole sprawling limit-less city is open to all. Life is hard in Calcutta, for its vast middle class population, its slums, its pavement-dwellers hits you in the eye. But what is there in Dhaka to make us feel so comfy? Compared to the mobility one enjoys in Calcutta, and I am talking of the average Calcuttan, the average man here will feel cooped and confined. Having neither the diversity nor the affordability of Calcutta's transport system, we are denied one of the basic facilities a city of the size of Dhaka provides everywhere in all parts of the world.

I am not talking on the basis of the city's crime reports,

but having spent about a week in Calcutta, I am willing to believe what is claimed in its favour: it is perhaps the safest city after dusk for men, especially for women. The thought struck me as we, myself and my daughter, lingered on the lake-side in Dhakurika. Evening deepened, and darkness descended. Either by default or by deliberation, the street lights were not on. Used to the excessive lighting system of our neighbouring Gangsadd compounds, and beyond, the Chandrima Udyan (now renamed Zia Udyan), my daughter was a little uneasy for lack of lights, but she was quickly reassured, finding scores of women moving freely in that half-light.

The Ramkrishna Mission Cultural Centre where we were staying has not changed since my last stay here many years ago. The same quiet, the same friendliness and a sort of loneliness combined with a sense of spiritual and intellec-

tual pursuits without any loss of efficiency considered as a place of residence for visitors. — I had known it all as a characteristic of the Centre, and I was delighted to see that nothing had changed over the years. We were made to feel welcome the moment we were there, and this in a manner, entirely smooth and unobtrusive, which no five-star hotel can provide. Clearly enough, this was not one of the busy times of the year, as the unchanging faces in the dining hall indicated.

But the quiet was too good to be true. It was broken, if not within the precincts of the Centre, in the City outside.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

The cause — the Ballygunj by-election for an Assembly seat. We felt it all the more because we were right within the constituency. Apprehensions of breach of peace were being aired during the days before the election, 9th June, and Central Minister Mamata Banerji of Congress-I had been sending out signals of alarm, at the same time exhorting her partymen not to shy away from the polling centres. The CPM cadre apparently has acquired considerable notoriety for their efficiency in jamming the polling centres. The procedure was explained to me in detail by a gentleman of the locality whom we allowed to share our taxi on way to Chaurangi. Elections in West Bengal, according to him, have been reduced to a farce. Party cadres — every party has its own cadre — wherever and whenever they can, will take over, will crowd into the polling booths, carrying voters' lists supplied by officials within, and will take

care of the votes not yet cast, helped by the list showing, which votes were yet to be cast.

The Congress announced a twelve hour's bandh on the tenth in protest against massive rigging resorted to by CPM cadre-fellows and the rampant use of force by musclemen. The withdrawing parties also complained of the police inaction. In fact, one of the leaders sharply demanded the immediate removal of the police chief who had earlier committed the signal mistake of proclaiming that no body had died in police firing. Indians preferred to believe what they saw on the TV screen rather than what the police chief said.

The drama over the dead body that followed was an appropriate commentary on the politics that prevail, I dare say, on both sides of the border. First Congress claimed the dead man as its partymen. This was firmly challenged by CPM. The family of Swapan Chakravarty affirmed that he was not politically attached to

any party. So Congress graciously withdrew its claim without withdrawing its charge of the senseless killing of a non-activist who had gone there to collect his wife from her working place. The family showed remarkable dignity and firmness on the question of the disposal of the dead body. First to show sympathy for the dead and crowd into the house were the local CPM party workers but the patron-role they wanted to play was coolly rebuffed by the aggrieved family. We heard talks of raising a memorial on the spot where Swapan Chakravarty fell.

The fiasco of the by-election led to a call for twelve hours bandh on the tenth June by the Congress. Jyoti Basu's government was contemplating countermeasures to foil the strike when, like god-send, came the news that Mr. S D Persad, Secretary, Election Commission, descending from Delhi on SOS call, has, after a quick assessment of the situation, ordered a halt to the counting of votes. Put came a twenty-four hours bandh call by CPM, in protest against the highhandedness of, and interference with West Bengal's politics by, Delhi's Election Commission.

All this was high drama for Calcuttans. In the Calcutta press the election and the aftermath eclipsed all other news, not excluding the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro. For two of us, it meant a day of anxiety for our return to Dhaka was scheduled for tenth. All flights for the day were cancelled. But Biman rose to the occasion, arranged two extra flights for the eleventh and all the stranded passengers of the tenth, many of them anxious to be home before Eid, were safely landed in Dhaka, well before midnight.

Priorities for Ramos

With the stage set for Fidel V Ramos assuming the presidency of the Philippines on June 30, priorities for the new administration of the archipelago have started coming into focus.

The first task facing the new President who at least partly owes his victory to the endorsement of his outgoing predecessor, Corason Aquino, is to establish himself as the head of the government in his own right. In the process, the administration must create its own political base, preferably by bringing together forces which had backed six other presidential contenders. Ramos may find it difficult to emerge as a consensus leader in a country where political divisions are sharp, generally based on old personal loyalties. But the president-designate who combines a pronounced military background as a former Defence Secretary with experience in a civilian administration should at least make his mark as a strong decisive leader. The drift that people in the Philippines had witnessed in the long six-year rule of Aquino should be a thing of the past. However, something of the idealism that had motivated the outgoing president and, indeed, millions of people who had brought her to power, should survive as a kind of national legacy.

In terms of hard realities prevailing in the country, it is the economy that should get the immediate attention of Ramos. Many, if not most, of the problems which President Aquino had inherited from the Marcos regime are still there, ranging from corruption to bureaucratic bottlenecks, poor economic management in the private sector to unsure response from foreign investors to the government's call for joint ventures. This does not mean that things did not start moving in the right direction in, say, rural development, education and health care. The new administration should build on some of these achievements and start pushing the private sector to play its role more decisively than ever before in the field of industry, promotion of exports and joint ventures. It is the private sector which must revive the economy of a country that is often dubbed as the sick man of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In one of his recent statements, Ramos called for a new look at his country's relations with the United States which is due to pull out from the military bases from the Philippines by the end of this year. This has resulted from the rejection of a new bases treaty by the Senate, a treaty that, negotiated by the Aquino administration, would have allowed Washington to Subic Bay Naval Base for an additional 10 years. The consequences of the US withdrawal from Subic Bay would be felt in economic and defence fields. It is hard to see how the new administration can reopen the negotiation without undermining the prestige of the Senate and, what's more, without aggravating the divisiveness in the country. Such a move is unlikely to be in the mind of Ramos. However, it is still possible for the new administration to work out access arrangements for US forces at Subic and the nearby Cubi Point Air Base. If it is important for the Philippines to see such arrangements for providing jobs to thousands of Filipinos in these bases, it is also vital for Ramos to strengthen his administration's relations with Washington for economic reasons. In this respect, the Philippines will be guided by a down-to-earth realism which governs the thinking of so many other developing countries, including Bangladesh.

Celebrating Our Culture

The five-day long Bangalee Sangskriti Utsav 1999, or the Bengali cultural festival, which ends today at the Shilpakala Academy, marks another milestone in the resurgence of cultural awareness of the people of this country. Organised by Gonohajya Sangstha, a non-government development organisation (NGO), the festival also makes a significant contribution to increasing the level of grass-roots initiative in promoting Bengali culture.

It was perhaps rather fitting that such a festival was inaugurated by Begum Sufia Kamal just two days before she celebrated her 82nd birthday. Sufia Kamal has been one of the brightest leading ladies of Bengali womanhood, ever since she broke out of the stifling conservatism of our society. From the day her first poem was published in Mohammad Nasiruddin's Shaugat many years ago, Sufia Kamal has waged a relentless battle against male supremacy, religious dogma and superstition, social injustice and political subjugation, using the Bengali word — spoken as well as written — as a mighty weapon.

Bengali society still suffers from many of those ills, and a renaissance of Bengali culture, with its inherent secular message and folk tradition deeply rooted in the rural soil of this country, can help to combat the evils of bigotry, superstition and xenophobia.

One of the main areas of discussion at the festival has been the perceived differences between the cultures of rural and urban Bangladesh. True, over the years a discernible cleavage has appeared between rural and urban cultures, reflected in music, poetry, ways of life etc, with the urban people being more receptive to foreign influences; but the roots of the two remain essentially the same.

The utsav, which has sought to project the rural soul of Bengali culture to an urban audience, has the potential to become an eagerly-awaited annual or bi-annual event. The organisers and their many prominent backers have taken a bold and imaginative step which ought to prove to be the beginning of a process than an one-off affair. The utsav's non-political, non-communal, character makes it an event that can be entertaining as well as educational for a cross-section of society, and raise the general level of awareness about our cultural heritage. However, the organisers ought to give some thought in future to changing the date of the event. If, for instance, the festival was held from first of Baishakh every year, then that would surely attach a far greater symbolic value to it than any other date. It would also enrich the festivals surrounding the Bengali New-Year.

Helpless Palestinians Ask: 'Law? Where is the Law?'

Barbara Nimri Aziz writes from Jerusalem

AS Arab and Israeli delegates go through another round of peace talks in Washington, Palestinians at home are more dismayed than ever. They are facing the cruelest military rule anyone here has seen, in the wake of increased economic hardships.

In the Occupied Territories, living conditions have never been worse, say residents. Already scarce water is now subject to more cutbacks, as Israel drains water from the West Bank aquifer for the needs of Jews.

Unemployment heightens as intifada strikes are augmented by more restrictions on Palestinian movement into Israel in search of low-paying day jobs.

Remittances from Palestinian relatives in Kuwait and other Gulf states have ceased with their exodus from the Gulf. Support grants from no-longer sympathetic Arab states are cut back. For the first time in memory, Palestinians are experiencing hunger due to poverty.

On top of these difficulties is the increased military oppression. Some 1.7 million Palestinians today find themselves the target of intensified Israeli army action.

"What was once unusual and shocking has become normal," says a Ramallah resident.

"This is nothing, nothing," I am assured by the mother of a jailed lad when I express my shock over how the young man was picked up from the house.

She goes on to describe the night raids on her home, house searches and thefts, hit-and-run car incidents, extortionist charges for permits and fees paid to avoid arrest, searches of children on their way from school. And curfews.

The population can offer little resistance. Israeli soldiers, it seems, are having a field day as they conduct their campaign with almost total impunity.

When asked what legal action they look to for redress,

While Arabs and Israelis continue their sporadic talking, the situation for the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories gets no better. Assault, death, harassment, curfews, raids — all continue under cruel military rule. A Gemini News Service correspondent who has just revisited the West Bank compares life there now with what she found on previous trips. This is her graphic report.



THE SUFFERERS
Two generations on the West Bank

Palestinians say: "Law? There is no law. What the soldiers want, they do. To whom can we go? Where is the law?"

They sometimes laugh at what they see as naive questions from reporters or other outsiders. "Legal rights? Authorisation papers? Court procedures?"

Since the intifada began in 1987 when local police resigned, and mukhtar (town mayors) stepped down, normal community protective mechanisms disappeared.

With the intifada, a wide range of Palestinian associations were formed to address problems and organise communities. But these have their limits.

They can organise strikes,

call demonstrations and arrange secret classes for students. They can set up a code of discipline for residents. They can form food and health co-operatives. But they cannot protect Palestinians from direct assault, death or harassment by the Israeli army.

They cannot prevent the uprooting of trees, the demolition of homes, or the arrest of family members.

A Hebron resident explains: "Soldiers arrive at any time and demand entry. They destroy my furnishings, our food, take away my son, my husband. No Palestinian can stop them."

Neighbours standing nearby second her report, crowding in to give testimony of the latest insult, assault, shooting or

detention. Israeli politicians say they have smashed the intifada uprising. They justify their strong-arm tactics with this claim.

"They cannot stop our struggle," retorts a Palestinian father. "We will go on fighting. My sons will resist. I will resist."

Since 1991 the number of deaths due to military shootings and tear gas is down: 99 in 1991 and 92 in 1990, from 407 in 1989 and 404 in 1988, giving Israel's claim a statistical basis.

But for Palestinians there is no respite, no lessening of resistance. Hospital reports will bear out the continued beatings and shootings Palestinians encounter daily. Prison accounts, too.

On their side, Palestinian resistance is no less, even as they sustain increasing hardships. The situation can only evoke admiration.

Youths and girls, even small defiant children, still dare to toss stones at armoured vehicles and at unwelcome yellow-plated Jewish settler cars passing their neighbourhoods.

Where universities remain closed by military authority, students somehow gather privately to meet their professors and pursue their courses. Palestinians occasionally attack armed Jewish settlers. And the forbidden green, black and white of the Palestinian flag is still seen, spray-painted on walls or hanging from electricity wires.

Yet one wonders how much more Palestinians can endure and how long they can resist. How long can the Palestinians

hold out while politicians talk? Because there is no status quo established while the peace talks proceed, Israel stepped up its settlement construction in these months. It also increased its oppressive measures against the civilian population and it conducts execution-style killings of selected Palestinians on an intensified scale.

On a two-week visit to the region, to compare what I saw on visits in 1990 and 1989, it is easily apparent that the Israeli army is acting with more ferocity. Palestinians, with the opening of the peace talks in Madrid on October 30, 1991 did not expect this heightened iron-fist policy.

They were waving olive branches, they said, only to find they are now met by even more relentless punishment from the Israeli authorities.

Recent months across the Occupied Lands saw roundups of young men, conducted at night in house-to-house searches. Bands of soldiers raid a house, smashing doors if they are not answered. Usually the most senior woman answers to be confronted with demands.

"Where is Bassam?" She is told to turn over a son. She will resist as long as she can, while her furniture is smashed, windows broken, books ripped, food thrown on the floor or mixed with salt. Before the soldiers leave, they will most likely have her son Bassam with them.

Then this mother will spend a week at Red Cross offices to find out which prison Bassam is in. Likely he will be in another part of the Territo-

ries and she must apply for a travel permit to visit him, spending a day on the road.

She will contact a lawyer, either an Israeli or a Palestinian. She will pay from her meagre family income to have half the concocted charges dropped. Even then, her son will still go to jail.

Today, everything is harsher. Palestinians find it harder to move around the territories. Orange ID holders are not as restricted as green card carriers, yet they now need permits to move from city to city, to go to Jerusalem for Friday prayer or Sunday service, to see their son or daughter in prison or to make a business trip.

And the curfews. One of today's most punishing strategies is the use of total curfews. Partial curfews have become routine in these Palestinian communities. They are slapped on an entire city at the height of the business day or at prayer time in the evening. Now total curfews are imposed.

From early December into January, Ramallah city and nearby El Birch experienced this community punishment. For weeks on end, 24 hours-a-day, no Palestinian was permitted to leave home. People could not go to work.

They could not go to mosques or visit relatives, or a hairdresser, or the market. All schools and businesses were closed. For an emergency hospital visit, they needed special permits. With phones in only one of every six or seven homes, simple communication among families became difficult.

"Will there be peace?" In October one heard people here asking this. Some were cynical. Others kept hope. Today the question crosses few Palestinian lips.

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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.

Re-excavation of canals

Sir, Bangladesh is a land of rivers. It is also mainly an agricultural country. But at present we see a dismal picture. There are, however, reasons for this. The main reason, ironically, is lack of water for irrigation.

In the past our rivers were more suitable for navigation than now. But for an earthquake in Assam, and for building of Farakka barrage in West Bengal, these rivers have silted up losing their navigability and drainage capacity. Besides, due to obstructed ecological balance the level of water of un-

derground is also going down. As a result, in dry season, we suffer very much for lack of water, and in the rainy season, for excess of water.

But if we can retain a huge quantity of water of rainy season, we can easily irrigate the fields in the dry season. For this, excavation and or re-excavation of canals is an important programme which was started by shaheed president Ziaur Rahman and stalled by H M Ershad. Again this programme has been undertaken by the present government. But in the past we observed that this programme was not as successful as we expected. So, I hope, the present gov-

ernment would be alert enough to seal the loopholes, if any, beforehand, for a quick progress towards success.

Aktar UzZaman
West Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

Plight of small investors

Sir, Of late we heard a lot about the plight of small investors and how they have been duped both by the public companies as well as by ICB. Here I would give only one instance about the unethical practices of ICB. This relates to issuance of sixth ICB MF of Tk 50 crore in 1988. Having been encouraged by the success of the previous issues ranging from Tk 50 lac to Tk 1.50 crore, ICB ingeniously devised the sixth MF by purchasing such shares as BTC and BOL (worth more than 50% of the total issue price) at

prices which were more than 16 and 13 times the par value of these shares respectively.

They also loaded this issue with shares like Alpha Tobacco, Glaxo, NTC, Beximco, Bata, etc purchased at prices much above the par values. Our calculations show that even if all these shares yield a dividend ranging from 20% to 30% (which is unlikely) the management is not in a position to declare more than 4% to 6% dividend on the sixth MF. In the first two years, they managed to declare some reasonable dividend because of interest income from investors' subscription money (the 6th MF was oversubscribed by about 4-5 times) and somewhat unethical practice of selling some bonus and other shares to ICB Unit Fund and cashing the capital gains at the cost of ICB Unit Fund. This practice has also left the Unit Fund high and dry. People are no longer in a rush to buy ICB Unit certificates. The management have bungled things

in such a big way that wholesale change in that organisation is indeed called for.

No half-hearted action on the part of the concerned authorities is likely to bring back these small investors who ventured to invest their small savings in the interest of industrialisation of the country and in the process lost their entire savings — lock, stock and barrel. The portfolios of sixth MF should be suitably rearranged so that it can give reasonable dividend in future.

Abdur Rahman
Mallbagh, Dhaka.

AIDS patients

Sir, In Bangladesh, we hear, that nobody is afflicted with AIDS. Is it authentic? AIDS patients are found in our neighbouring country India. How can we be free from AIDS? Both coming and going of people

between India and Bangladesh is a daily matter. Can we not — anyone or some of us — in the process contact some AIDS victims? I met with an American citizen recently and spent with him long three hours. By the by he asked me, "How many AIDS patients are there in your country?" "Not a single man," I replied. He said to me, "If one visits a brothel abroad and back home spreads the germs, although unknowingly, how would you then know that Bangladesh is free from AIDS?" Really, I am in doubt whether we have any effective "detect and check" mechanism.

So, I would like to draw the attention of the concerned authority that it resorts to check-up system for the foreign visitors as soon as they arrive.

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