

The Show must go on

The developments stemming from the demolition of the Babri Masjid on Sunday cast a shadow over the Summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Co-operation (SAARC) scheduled here on Saturday and Sunday. However, thanks to the hard work put in by officials from all the seven member countries during the past three days, the stage is set for the meeting of the heads of governments. As official sources close to various delegations, including that of India, indicated yesterday, the thought of seeking a postponement is far from the mind of any member of the alliance. This is as good an assurance as any that the Summit will be held on schedule.

At one stage or another, this official line is unfortunately obscured by uncertainties on the political scene in New Delhi. Not surprisingly, Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao is under intense political pressure of various kinds, ranging from a demand for his resignation to a volatile law and order situation in different parts of the country. In these circumstances, say some cynics, Rao may prefer staying back home to attending the two-day Summit.

A question mark also hangs over the participation of Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Having blamed Rao for the traumatic development at Ayodhya, some circles in Islamabad have made a case against Sharif joining his counterpart from India at any summit at this moment. It is most certainly a minority view. However, one cannot yet dismiss the possibility that it may produce a negative impact on Pakistan's plan for the Summit.

These speculations touch on intense feelings prevailing in different countries of the region, especially in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These feelings are strong enough to distort the perspective and divert the attention of some member countries from a practical and pragmatic course of action.

This practical course of action should aim at only one straightforward objective: The Summit should be held on schedule. This means that heads of governments of India and Pakistan must put in their best efforts to tackle any complications obstructing their trips to Dhaka and ensure their participation at the Summit on Saturday and Sunday.

Under any circumstances, we need the presence of all seven heads of governments not just for a successful meeting but also because, under the SAARC Charter, no Summit can be held if any head of government is unable to attend it. It is this somewhat rigid provision that stood in the way of holding the summit in Colombo when the King of Bhutan was unable to join the meeting. An opinion has gained ground among experts that this provision—and perhaps one or two others—should be amended for the sake of introducing a certain flexibility in the working rules of the grouping. Whether this matter can be taken up at the Dhaka Summit is a little doubtful. But a serious study of this question, perhaps at the ministerial level, may well be overdue.

With the Indian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs due to arrive in Dhaka today, we have the welcome reaffirmation of the interest of the Rao Government in the success of the Dhaka Summit. Since most of the work of the Summit will be done at the ministerial level on Thursday and Friday, the duration of the two-day meeting of the heads of governments can perhaps be adjusted to suit the convenience of the Indian Prime Minister. Notwithstanding any criticisms the people and the government have made of his policy on the Babri Masjid issue or, for that matter, any embarrassment he might feel in facing his critics, Rao is assured a genuine welcome when he arrives in Dhaka for the historic meeting. His very presence here at a time when his country, his government and, indeed, he himself face a difficult time will mean a major contribution to the success of the Summit and, indeed, for the alliance itself.

Tough German Asylum Law

Germany has decided to tighten its asylum laws—among the most liberal in the world—to tackle the increasing influx of refugees into the country. The measure is, moreover, meant to pacify the anti-foreigner sentiment in line with the neo-Nazi ideology. No doubt the making of the asylum laws there should have been well in order ever since the end of the cold war. Germany's relative affluence in the whole of Europe has turned it into a place where the Europeans, especially those of East Europe, think they can shape up a better destiny for themselves. The proposed tougher laws will surely make their entry difficult if not impossible.

Admittedly, Germany had few options other than going for tougher laws. But timing is rather unfortunate. Unfortunately, because the move will be seen as the placating of the rightists responsible for a wave of attacks on foreigners in recent times. Once concessions are made to the rightists like the neo-Nazis, the government will be under pressure to do more. There is no knowing where things will ultimately end if given in to such pressures. With a most dreadful past, in terms of racial history, Germany can hardly afford to give any ground to the neo-Nazis.

The fact that people seek to stay in foreign lands for economic and political reasons should not go out of sight of the German leaders. The difference between the two kinds of status is clearly defined and therefore the proposed laws should not be closed-door and restrictive against those seeking political asylum. German leaders seem to be concerned that the political asylum seekers are not needlessly turned down. This does not however remove the cause for concern because the right-wing groups there have threatened to intensify their violent activity against foreigners.

The German government may have thought of a rather straight-cut solution to the problem. The legal measures to check the inflow of refugees do not necessarily eliminate the need for tougher action against the neo-Nazis. The political leaders need not be unduly soft towards the rightists because they can surely count on the popular upsurge against the neo-Nazi elements. The candle procession recently held in Munich has amply demonstrated the popular will of the German people. The tougher laws ought not, moreover, to be applied against foreigners already in Germany for decades. Their involvement in Germany's social interactions should be enough to qualify them as citizens of that country. Any backlash against them will tear apart the German social fabrics. So the government's task is made all the more challenging and we hope it will be equal to the task.

WHEN Winston Churchill said that Indian Constituent Assembly was a 'meeting of caste Hindus', the observation was countered by pointing out that among the 210 members, who attended the preliminary session, 35 represented the scheduled castes and tribes compared to 155 caste Hindus. The Assembly went on to guarantee them reservations in parliament, state assemblies, government jobs and educational institutions, although it abolished similar concessions to religious minorities, a practice during the British period.

It was atonement of sorts for the age-old treatment meted out to the lower caste by the upper. Even then the backward as such were not singled out for any special benefit. It was left to the state to give them representation in services but neither in parliament nor in state assemblies. Apparently, the constitution framers were not so much wrought up over their plight as they were on the scheduled castes.

The backward were accommodated in a proviso, as if it was a postscript, in Article 16, which enunciated the principle of equal opportunity in public employment. Even the proviso was negative: nothing would 'prevent' the state from reserving posts to any backward class of citizen. Nothing specific was accorded. The intention of constitution framers was further clear from Article 340, which authorised the President to investigate the conditions of backward classes but suggested nothing beyond.

Some states, specially in

the south, took advantage of the proviso in giving liberal reservations to the backward. But New Delhi always dithered on this point, dominated by the upper caste it has been. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, was daunted by the enormity of the task the Kaka Kalelkar committee chalked out by declaring India's 90 per cent population 'backward'.

The Centre's initiative came only in 1978 when the Janata government appointed a commission under Mandal to find out how many backward classes were in the country. The government did not last long enough to receive the report. Mrs Indira Gandhi, who succeeded the Janata government, saw the recommendations, identifying as many as 3,743 backward classes. She shelved the report with the remark that if it were ever implemented, the country would be up in arms.

Precisely that is what happened when V P Singh, the Janata Dal prime minister, retrieved the report, primarily to enlarge his political base. Violence and destruction engulfed practically entire northern India and some youths even burnt themselves. What saved the situation at that time was the stay granted by the Supreme Court, where the government order on reservations had already been challenged.

By upholding the order, the Supreme Court has, no doubt, given reservations the sanctity,

which the upper castes cannot easily ignore. That probably explains why the revival of agitation has not been possible, although some sporadic incidents did take place. Another reason for a scant attention is the lack of interest shown by the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party. They are not interested in fomenting trouble now because their primary purpose at that time was to pull down the government. Presently, they are vying with each other in claiming their contribution to the verdict be-

reservations. Now it has no compunction in maintaining the same old attitude of denial and discrimination towards the lower caste. Several studies conducted in various parts of India have shown that economic benefits have made little dent in social backwardness. The Supreme Court's loud message may erode up in a whimper as the claims on reservations for the scheduled castes have.

The Supreme Court has a point in denying concessions to the 'creamy layer' of a par-

cas; the yardsticks will have to vary.

Still the point to consider is whether one crosses the caste barrier when he or she crosses the poverty line. It is a fallacy that economic status wins social status. It has not happened in the US, a developed society. The affluent Negroes there have not crossed the colour barrier; even the best among them cannot get accommodation in a posh area. In India, it is worse because the prejudice is furrowed so deep in the hearts of the upper strata that riches or jobs with the lower castes are too weak a force to demolish the obscurantist attitude.

Why Mahatma Gandhi did not ask for reservations and why he declared even a fast unto death when the British tried to introduce the separate electorate for the scheduled castes was because of the conviction and experience he had that economic revolution did not supplant social revolution. He endearingly called the scheduled castes as the Harijan (child of God) and included their betterment in his charter of constructive work. But he knew that economic benefits or reservations were only palliatives that might divide the Hindu society further.

Presuming reservations in services would do good, what good is possible when all the government jobs put together constitute two per cent of the total employment in the country? The private sector rejects

the lower castes on the plea that they lack merit. Other avenues are limited. It is social revolution that can change the scene.

The constitution framers were probably conscious of it. That is the reason why they wanted concessions to cease after 20 years, reduced to 10 in 1959. Not that they thought that the lower caste will make it in two decades. Their expectation was that reservations will set into motion a determined effort to eliminate prejudice and backwardness which will gain momentum in 20 years' time and will need no crutches subsequently. They have been proved wrong.

The tendency to extend concession — this has been done four times in the case of the scheduled castes — is wrong in principle because it has developed vested interests and at the same time perpetuated divisions of the caste system. The upper caste are so irked that the society is increasingly at war within. Their youth is getting frustrated and the talented among them are leaving the country.

What the nation does not realise is that concessions to the lower caste and the backward are not an event; it is a process. If the process is to succeed, many more steps will need to be taken. This is not possible with the old structure where the bottom tiers continue to remain deprived. If India is to grow into a performing democracy, it will become necessary to discard or alter those aspects of the system which inhibit the attainment of distributive justice in a framework of freedom.

A Process, Not an Event

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

cause the backward constitute roughly 25 per cent of the electorate.

What comes out again and again is that political parties are interested in vote bank, not in the uplift of the backward. Reservations for the scheduled castes is a case in point. It is now more than 40 years since these concessions have been available. True, some among them have moved up the ladder but the parties have done pretty little to fight the prejudice against them.

In fact, the Hindu society has become more intransigent and more stratified. It feels it has done its bit by giving

particular caste. Indeed, the articulate among them have cornered most of gains and continue to do so. But placed as they are in public life, they have a political clout. It will be a long and relentless battle if their names or of their children are sought to be deleted from the list of beneficiaries. The proposed commissions to ascertain who is a backward, individuals as well as castes, may become dens of pressure and corruption. The criterion to determine backwardness may embroil the nation in an unending process in differentiating those who belong to the creamy layer in rich and poor states, in rural and urban ar-

Migrant Workers Fuel Singapore's Growing Economy

Han Jei writes from Singapore

With a local labour force growing at only 2 per cent a year, the need for labour is inevitably fulfilled by foreign workers

ANY Malaysian workers believe their lot of gold lies just across the causeway in the island state of Singapore.

For more than 20 years, thousands of Malaysian workers have come to Singapore to work mainly in the manufacturing, construction and hotel industries.

"In Malaysia it is hard for us non-Malays to find a job to survive, so I had to come to Singapore. Now, I even have some savings," said Mary Tan, who first worked in Singapore as a domestic helper at the age of 17 years old.

As a Chinese in Malaysia, like most-Malays, Ms Tan had experienced the racial quota system imposed by the Malaysian government in favour of Malays in the country. Her story is typical of many Malaysians who had preferred to take their chances in Singapore instead of slugging it out in Malaysia.

Looking for ways to "fill her ricebowl," Ms Tan left Malacca, her hometown, to look for a job in Singapore. Since then, she has been working in Singapore for more than 20

years. Ms Tan is now a Quality Control Officer in a locally-owned electronics factory in Singapore. After working 14 years in various electronics companies, she finally earns a relatively high monthly salary of US\$538 a month.

Today even Malaysians from professional sectors have come to Singapore to work in white collar jobs, as architects, doctors, engineers and lawyers.

Singapore is one of the fastest developing Asian countries with an annual economic growth rate of 8 to 9 per cent. In order to continue feeding the country's enormous demand for goods and services, Singapore had to solve labour shortage.

With a local labour force growing at only 2 per cent a year, the country's need was inevitably fulfilled by foreign workers. The government even tried to reduce their dependence on foreign workers by substituting labour-intensive industries with capital intensive ones.

But this did not diminish the need for foreign workers. Today out of a workforce of

only 1.3 million, more than 200,000 are foreign workers.

The majority of the foreign workforce is composed of Malaysians who have easier accessibility and is culturally more adaptable to Singapore than workers from other countries. The rest are mainly Philippine domestic helpers and Thai, Sri Lanka and Bangladeshi blue collar workers.

As a result of government concern about increasing dependence on foreign workers, quotas were set for different industries. Previously, foreign workers have comprised up to almost 50 per cent of the total workforce in some companies. Now the quota for the hiring of foreign workers in the manufacturing industry is 45 per cent while in the service sector, it is 20 per cent. But in the construction business, foreign workers constitute as much as two-thirds of the total

workforce.

Unlike the other foreign workers, Malaysian migrant workers were allowed to work in the retail, banking and community services sector. But the number of Malaysian workers in these sectors were not allowed to exceed the 10 per cent quota.

Aside from providing an abundance of labour, foreign workers provide a massive amount of revenue for the government. This is because all employers in Singapore have to pay levy for their foreign workers.

For instance, in the manufacturing industry, a 2-tier levy system was devised to tax employers hiring foreign workers. For the first 35 per cent of the foreign workers hired, employers have to pay S\$300 (US\$188) for each worker monthly. For the next 10 per cent, the amount is S\$440 (US\$281).

In general, all employers have to pay an average levy of about S\$300 (US\$188) for each foreign worker per month. This levy does not apply to college graduates who earn more than S\$1,500 (US\$938) a month.

Most of the 200,000 foreign workers are probably not college graduates and earn less than this amount. As such, on the average the government can easily collect a hefty S\$7.2 billion (US\$4.5 billion) yearly from these levy charges.

Employers now feel more taxed because they have to pay more for each worker than before the levy system was implemented. As such, many of them push part of the burden to the foreign workers by giving them lower wages to offset these monthly levy payments to the government.

It is believed the government has been trying to push hard for the levy system. Before most foreign workers would be covered by the country's Central Provident Funds (CPF) savings scheme. The government definitely collects more revenue from the levy system than the CPF scheme

where the accumulated amount is ultimately returned to the workers.

The CPF is a social scheme which requires the employers to contribute 18 per cent of the workers' gross salary and the workers themselves to contribute 22 per cent of their salary into a savings scheme. Usually, the total amount is given to foreign workers when they leave the country.

But in the case of Malaysian workers, they are required to fulfill many conditions if they want to withdraw their CPF savings before the age of 55 years old. Many Malaysian workers who have left Singapore will have to wait for at least another 20 years before they can withdraw their CPF contributions. As such, billions of dollars would be held by the Singapore government and these funds can be used for their own national projects.

For the past few years, the Malaysian Human Resource Ministry has been negotiating with the Singapore government for the release of these funds, but they have not been successful. — *Depthnews Asia*

Raunchy Television Invades Pakistan

Satellite television invades conservative Pakistan and upsets the censors. Beena Sarwar of IPS reports from Lahore

WHEN images on television screens suddenly get snowed out in Pakistan, viewers know the censors are at work.

Kissing and embracing are strictly prohibited. Fashion models and pregnant women are not shown. Even words like 'sex' and 'pregnancy' are muffled out of birth control and AIDS-awareness campaigns on Pakistan television.

In the country's three largest cities Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, where the US-based Cable News Network (CNN) is beamed by a partly government-owned network into millions of homes eight hours every day, programmes are sanitised.

The government decides what viewers can see on the two networks: the state-run Pakistan Television (PT) and the two-year-old Shalimar Television Network (STN) which telecasts CNN.

But officials have no control over satellite television. Dish antennas have mushroomed on rooftops across this country of

120 million people. More and more Pakistanis, bored with bland sermons on state-controlled television, are investing on satellite dishes whose prices have come crashing down in the past year.

In 1991, a parabolic dish cost roughly US\$800, affordable only for the very wealthy. Now prices for a locally-assembled receiving set is down to about US\$320, less than the monthly salary of most urban professionals.

With a satellite dish, Pakistani homes are hooked to Hongkong-based Star TV, the first to cash in on the burgeoning market in South Asia. It offers the BBC, a 24-hour sports and music channel, US serials and films and a Chinese channel which sometimes shows films in English with Chinese subtitles.

Young couple Tehmina and Rashid Toosi installed a dish in their two-bedroom condo-

minium in Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city three months ago. Tehmina, a designer, says she never misses 'The Bold and the Beautiful', a raunchy soap on Star TV. If she's out, the episode is recorded.

Though moralists in the tradition-bound Islamic society are up in arms, the middle class is mesmerised.

In a hotel in Vihari, a small town 50 km from Lahore in Pakistan's Punjab province, guests are hypnotised by gyrating singers on Music Television (MTV), a channel that even the urban elite find difficult to digest.

Says media man Shoaib Hashmi, "It (MTV) never shows anyone with any clothes

viewers.

Pakistan's religious leaders who wield considerable political clout have forced their strict Islamic interpretations of social behaviour on government policies.

According to a recent directive, all actresses on state-controlled television have to cover their heads with a dupatta (a long scarf draped traditionally as a sign of piety) whether the character they are portraying demands it or not.

That sentiment is shared by poet and feminist Kishwar Naheed who junks MTV as a channel of "half-naked women and weird dances."

For a people used to state-run television where women are demure, passive and helpless, satellite television suddenly offers really heady stuff. "I watch it for laughs," says Tehmina who unlike most viewers in Pakistan has been exposed to Western culture having studied in the United States for three years.

According to media critics, as long as the government keeps the state-controlled electronic media on a tight leash, foreign satellite television networks are going to win

Television actresses have protested, but the government in Islamabad is not listening because it does not want to antagonise fundamentalists groups who wield considerable street power.

The new rules even restricts the amount of time women can be shown in advertisements on television.

Feminist groups like the Women's Action Forum point out the recent increase in crime (Particularly rape) countrywide is a fall-out of Pakistan's Islamic laws, which they say are not sympathetic to women's rights.

OPINION

Railways in Peril

Shahabuddin Mahtab

The two zones of the Bangladesh Railways were created aiming at better and efficient management of the available resources, the passenger and goods bogies, safe railway tracks, efficient signalling system, stoppage of pilferages etc. But, as events have shown, the situation is deteriorating with each passing year. There seems to be no control or care of the Railway properties in the Western Zone.

A vernacular daily report date-lined Ishurdi, the 22nd November pinpointed the total indifference, thefts, corruptions etc that have brought the whole of the train service into a nightmare. The railways were first operated in the Western Zone as far back as the eighties sixties. Two hundred and fifty kilometres of new track was added in the nineteen sixties, to complete the new railway track connecting the southern districts, and thus completing a network. In the Paksey and Lalmonirhat divisions the railway tracks cover 985 miles. Most of these tracks have become quite unsafe, as most of the sleepers have eroded, the stones covering the track have dwindled leading to shabby journeys, and multiplicity of accidents, most of which could have been avoided with the right initiative, and above all the right integrity.

It is reported that in the Western Zone there are 560 passenger carrying coaches, and almost all of these are in a deplorable condition. The normal life, with proper care, of a passenger coach is thirty years, and if this criterion is applied, most of the coaches now in use are to be discarded. It is far more important to care and repair the bogies that we have, rather than buying new engines and coaches in a lavish scale. Our first priority now should be to care, repair and protect the valuable and meagre rolling stocks that we have.

What has been said before is also applicable to the Eastern Zone, but to a lesser degree. Travelling in the Western Zone is always a torture for all categories of passengers. In the Dhaka and Chittagong areas, travelling is not so uncomfortable. At times the journeys could also be pleasant.

If we are looking for a better service, we have to protect the railway properties, and stop the constant pilferages at all costs. We have to admit that the railway tracks have weak sleepers and inadequate stone coverage. This is a safety aspect we cannot ignore. We must consolidate our position with the existing railway tracks and the rolling stocks, before rushing out for new purchases.

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.

Vehicle and police

Sir, The article captioned "Vehicle and the Policeman" was published on your esteemed daily in the column "Dhaka Day by Day" on November 6. It was written by Ms Parveen Anam. I, as a sufferer, thank her very much and congratulate her for her bold writing. In the months of January and July this year our policemen had taken twice my personal micro-bus leaving me alone on the road. I could not protest at that time. But Ms Parveen Anam had protested the other way round and her piece was written at the proper time. People should know the activities of the present administration. I had gone through Ms Parveen Anam's each and every writing pub-

lished in your daily. I found all her writings unique and exceptional. We are really proud of such category of writers. May God bless her.

Anthony Gomes
Wart, Dhaka

Rapprochement

Sir, US President Mr Bush has invited the President-elect Mr Clinton to the White House to familiarise him with the President house establishment and see for himself how it works since Clinton is soon going to live there.

As soon as Bush realised that he faces certain defeat, even before the official result was out, Bush conceded defeat

and congratulated Clinton and said that Clinton ran a good campaign and hoped that Clinton runs the country as well. In accepting the majesty of democracy Bush not only assured Clinton of his fullest support to the transition and his cooperation in running the country but also appealed to all to support Clinton in his task.

Clinton in reply paid handsome tribute to Bush's lifelong service to the country starting as a fighter pilot during the Second World War, his achievements in winning the Cold War and his leadership in defeating Iraq in the Gulf War with other allies.

What magnanimous gesture of political goodwill, foresight and patriotism displayed by the loser and the winner!

In contrast with this what is the scenario at home? The leader of the losing party vows to destabilise the govt of the winner from day one instead of accepting the majesty of the people revealing their choice in a universally acclaimed fair election and extending her hand of support for a difficult task. Time magazine once

commented that Bangladesh is a country difficult to govern even in normal times.

Instead the opposition leader — goes on queering the pitch.

At the same time the leader of the govt takes up most uncompromising stiff and hard-line attitudes towards the opposition. And so the battle lines are drawn up while the people of the country shudder to think what the future holds for them and suffer in silence. Why can't the two take a leaf out of the books of Bush and Clinton with a view to imbuing them.

Is a rapprochement impossible to attain in spite of the past mistakes and political failures and work towards achieving a lasting consensus for which the country is crying out? I hope the leaders are capable of rising above petty party considerations and display a sense of patriotism and political maturity for the sake of the country and the future generations.

S M Uddin
Dhanmondi, Dhaka