

## A Financial Scandal

With the Arab-backed Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) still awaiting a decent burial through a satisfactory settlement with thousands of depositors in different parts of the world, the Gulf region has been hit by another financial scandal. Although somewhat localised, its implications may well produce echoes right through the global monetary world, especially in the Middle East and parts of Europe.

The scandal centres around the collapse of Kuwait's investments in Spain resulting in the loss of more than \$4 billion in public funds through alleged mismanagement, downright cheating and lack of accountability. An opposition newspaper in Kuwait, Al Qabas, has just termed the loss as 'The Theft of the Century' in a banner headline on the report.

It relates to the move made by Grupo Torras, the Spanish unit of the London-based Kuwait Investment Office (KIO), filing for receivership to stop further losses. Since KIO is very much the financial arm of the Government of Kuwait, which manages world-wide investment portfolio for the country, the crisis in the Spanish operation raises several questions which can be — indeed, must be — answered through a high-level enquiry into the whole episode.

One such question refers to what is described as "undue secrecy" surrounding all investments by KIO which keeps the authorities concerned, not to mention the media, the parliament and the public at large, very much in the dark on how the funds are being managed. Being an investment company rather than a bank, KIO probably remains outside the purview of Kuwait's central banking control mechanism.

In this context, one must note, with regret, that this cash-rich region of Middle East and the Gulf has failed to create its own financial centre to take the place of conflict-ridden Beirut, which can be compared to either Hong Kong or Singapore. Similarly, it has also failed to set up a bank of international standard, with a global network of its own, which can operate alongside ten top western or Japanese institutions. This meant since the mid-seventies when the countries of the region started earning enormous revenue from their export of oil, they placed their massive deposits with European and US banks, thus helping these western financial institutions to reap maximum benefit out of the oil boom. Much of these deposits were invested in Europe and the United States to reduce the adverse effect of the staggering rise in oil prices. If it goes to the credit of BCCI for seeing the need of recycling part of the deposit back to countries in the Third World, it is a shame that this UAE-backed institution bungled its way into a collapse.

The collapse of BCCI leaves a vacuum which is unlikely to be filled in the near future. Meanwhile, the scandal that has now hit KIO creates new doubts about any of the existing financial institutions in the Gulf region, including this once-respected Kuwait organisation, earning public confidence and credibility at home and abroad. In this respect, even such a well-known institution as the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) is yet to make much impact on Muslim countries in Asia and Africa.

It is high time that the Gulf region undertook a careful review of its financial scene, with particular reference to the role played by its banks, investment companies and credit organisations. Such a review should focus on the level of management expertise available to these institutions, the accountability which is practised by the heads of these bodies and last not the least, on the monitoring role played by central banks in different Gulf countries. The crisis in KIO provides a signal that such a review is long overdue if the Gulf region is to enter the next century with better control than it has shown in recent past over its own financial fortunes, with a role to play throughout the developing world.

## A Singer Near to the Soul

In one of the most popular discs of all time, the singer crooned a passionate appeal 'when I shall be gone, do not carve my epitaph on any stone plate.' On Sunday that singer was gone — and a million music lovers must have by that day written his name in their hearts. Satinath Mukhopadhyaya became a regular heartthrob as soon as his first discs were out in the midfifties. It is a great compliment to his supreme achievement as a singer as also a composer that for close to four decades of unrelenting contribution to the storehouse of Bengali modern songs, he never compromised quality.

The genre that is known as modern songs in the Bengali musical culture never amounted to more than a torrent of commercially inspired compositions done in poor style and wanting in excellence, in spite of there being stalwarts among its composers and singers. Musically important Bengali songs stopped with the works of the five great composers spanning the end quarter of the last century and the first of the present. Raichand Boral, Pankaj Kumar Mallik, Himangshu Datta and Kamal Dasgupta carried on with the rich artistic tradition quite ably for some time. It was specially in the fifties, in the wake of partition of India, that Bengali music took a deep plunge into inanity. It was at that period of great crisis that Satinath emerged, to march as the lone standard-bearer. That he could play that historic role so ably — and technically — was done to his bringing some freshness to that genre by way of blending some thumri flavours and temperament in his songs, executed as adroitly as could only be done by one trained in the highest and most rigorous forms by none other than Chinnoy Lahiri. The result was Satinath sang straight to the heart of millions. And soon enough there were others joining the march of salvaging the poor hapless modern songs, eminent among them being Akhilbandhu Ghose who, however, never rose to earning half as much popularity as Satinath's. But as the earth's sweetest flowers soonest wither, good days too are short-lived. What distinguished Satinath's achievements from the Manna Dey tide that were to overtake and perhaps sweep away the soulful outpourings of the former — was one mountain of a difference, art.

We send our sympathy to his innumerable admirers and condolences to his wife Utpala who came to Calcutta from fabulous Dhaka in the early forties and matured into one of the finest singers of Bengali music. Satinath was incomparably Satinath — so different and so near to the soul. There won't be anyone like him ever again.

I returned from Pakistan a few days ago, head high, because anyone I met had a sneaking admiration for India's secular polity. It was taken for granted that the disputed Babri Masjid structure would not be harmed and Hindu fundamentalists, whatever their postures, would disperse from Ayodhya after carrying out cosmetic construction work (kar seva), as the Supreme Court had ordered.

Little did I realise then that I would not be able to face those who had faith in our institutions and claims of having tamed the tiger of communalism. The retaliation in Pakistan and Bangladesh, however mindless, does not lessen our culpability. It is condemnable, but we provoked first. Moreover, we are the ones who have opted for secularism, not they.

The Babri Masjid structure had come to be a symbol of our belief in a society that did not mix religion with politics and ensured equality to all communities before law. Both the tenets have been defeated. Still bigger damage has been done to our reputation of being a law-abiding nation, particularly when even the Supreme Court has been flouted. Yet some leaders have the cheek to say that their religious faith has more sanctity than the law of the land.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which controls the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), has never believed in secular principles. It has always stood for the Hindu Rashtriya, to the exclusion of Muslims. Therefore, it was a folly to expect anything else

from the BJP leaders, the RSS creatures. Still many liberals put faith in Kalyan Singh, the dismissed Uttar Pradesh chief minister, who talked glibly, and Lal Krishna Advani, who has resigned as the opposition leader after having destroyed the ethos of India or, for that matter, of Hinduism.

They could not have been expected to take the wind out of the sails of extremists because the two were riding a tiger, the mob frenzy, which was bound to go out of control. After collecting half a million people on the promise that the temple would be built on the place where the Babri Masjid structure stood, they could not have disciplined such a large throng, even if the two were not wanting to go to the extent the crowd went.

My thesis is that a core of the RSS, the BJP and the VHP had a plan to demolish the structure from the beginning. Persons like Atal Behari Vajpayee, Jaswant Singh and Sikander Bakht were not a party to the plan.

But then they hardly count. They have stuck to the party for the limelight they enjoy and the positions of the parliament membership they occupy, not for principles.

Even if the whole operation was not according to a game-plan, it is difficult to make out why there was only a small police force present between the Babri Masjid structure and the barricade, easy to scale. The

# Serving the History of Conflict: Destroying the Ethos of India

police men have given in writing that they had instructions not to use force. The sequence of events only confirms the suspicion.

The first shovel at the structure is struck at a little after 11 am. Till then Kalyan Singh continues to press the Central government to withdraw its forces which, under the constitution, can be deployed only at the specific request of a state government. Around 1 pm, when one dome of the masjid has been pulled

down, he gets in touch with Union Home Minister to send him more troops. But, in the meanwhile, Advani eggs on the public to intercept the central forces, then already on the way. It throws scores of burning tyres — how did they appear if they were not piled up earlier — and stalls the soldiers' entry into the area.

The demolition of the structure spreads over five hours. But there are no policemen, no para-military troops or the authorities in sight to try and stop the destruction even for the appearance sake. There was no contingency plan to protect the structure if the story of the mob going berserk is true. The much-maligned government of

take the credit of informing Narasimha Rao five days before the happening. Who is telling the truth can be verified against President Shankar Dayal Sharma's reported statement to some opposition members that he had warned Narasimha Rao against the possibility of the masjid's destruction on the basis of intelligence reports. His public statement asking prime Minister to 'uphold the rule of law' is a straight condemnation of the Rao government.

I do not accuse Narasimha Rao of conniving at the destruction of the structure. But I believe that he was riding two horses at the same time, not displeasing the BJP on the one hand and making efforts to find a solution on the other. Somehow I cannot get over the compliments which Balasaheb Deoras, the RSS chief, paid to him during my visit to Nagpur last month. He said: 'He is a good man who is trying to do his best, at one time attending to one problem and another some other time.'

Whether the BJP led Narasimha Rao up garden path or whether he was loathe to take any action against it is difficult to say. There could have been more information on this point forthcoming if Advani had not been silenced through the arrest. It is a foolish act because he has been served the ignominy of explaining his conduct in parliament.

In this context, it is pertinent to know that the central

government had decided around November 25 to impose President's rule in UP; even the gazette notification was prepared. But then everything was kept in abeyance. What happened behind the scenes to justify it is not yet clear. One cabinet minister has explained to me that the action had to be dropped because of the Supreme Court's fiat not to construct the temple on the disputed site.

This may well be true. But it only shows that New Delhi never appreciated the seriousness of the situation and treated it as a Congress party feud. The decision to restore the mosque is the minimum that we could have done to a tone for the sins of Hindu fundamentalists. But all our remorse cannot wash off the damage we have done to secularism.

The banning of religious bodies is a futile exercise. This has been done before with no concrete results. A secular name of a party does not guarantee its secular credentials. And what about the people in different parties who hide their fundamentalism behind secular clichés?

What the Congress, the BJP and other political parties should realise is that they have been pandering to religious sentiments of the people for too long. They have been wanting to build their vote banks. But this game has gone for too long, with drastic results. The country has been pushed too many times to a point where it has been difficult to retrieve it. What is more intriguing is that they are all united in serving the history of conflicts and confrontations that India has been.

## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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nounced after seeing the ugly mood of the opposition. It heaps the blame on the Kalyan Singh government. The post-cabinet meeting broadcast of Narasimha Rao was so listless and boring that even the two minutes, for which he spoke, sounded a long period. Had he announced the steps, which he did 30 hours later, the communal situation in the country would not have probably deteriorated to the extent it did.

Significantly, the director of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) was present at the cabinet meeting. Some cabinet ministers tell me that he did not claim to have given prior information about the destruction of the masjid. However, his department continues to

# Asian Basket Cases Fill Dinner Plates

HUNGER could once again in savage some countries of Asia and the Pacific, if "new frontier" technologies are not matched by agrarian and other structural reforms.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) raised this prospect at a Kyushu University symposium on "Agriculture Towards the 21st Century."

Asia today is the world's fastest growing region, FAO Regional Representative A Z M Obaidullah Khan said. It has shed its "basket case" image — a legacy of starvation that threatened much of South Asia in the '60s.

Agricultural production, in the early 1990s, topped a hefty 7 per cent annual growth. Thus a region of former "basket cases" achieved the greatest improvements in reducing undernutrition. Mr Khan cited a new FAO global study showing the number of

malnourished Asians has dwindled: from 751 million in 1971 to 520 million in 1990.

Inroads into the region's massive poverty were made possible by gains in agricultural production. From rice importer Vietnam valued to the world's third largest exporter, China, Indonesia, Laos and the Philippines approached self-sufficiency in food.

Mr Khan said the region can maintain, into the 21st century, the high growth rates that it mustered in the successful climb out of "basket case" status. But he quickly tacked on two provisos.

First: "The breathtaking advances" offered by the "new frontier technologies" opened by molecular biology, genetic engineering, cell and tissue culture as well as communication must be effectively harnessed.

And second: The region must not slacken closing the gap between the rich elites

A Special Correspondent writes from Fukuoka, Japan

The number of malnourished Asians has dwindled, from 751 million in 1971 to 520 million in 1990

and the impoverished masses. If this twin-thrust policy wavers, then the "new frontiers" will merely replicate the grim paradox of advances amid stagnation," the FAO official said. Mr Khan pointed out that "hunger amidst surfeit" characterised the advances Asia and the Pacific achieved in the 1980s.

Substantial economic gains went against a harsh reality: over 700 million Asians still struggle to survive on a dollar a day. They cluster in densely-packed rural areas like the Gangetic Plains of India or the island of Java in Indonesia," he said.

Ecological threats hack

dropped more sharply than anticipated, the FAO official observed: "There is a reproductive revolution in Southeast Asia. But due to the large population base, the region still adds almost 18 million people annually to its rates. That is roughly the equivalent of one Malaysia," he said.

Novelty of the "new frontier technologies should not sap support for less glamorous but essential programmes," the FAO representative, stressed. Among these are: agrarian reforms, programmes to curb post-harvest losses, renewable energy and support for small farmers.

"Our attention spans are

notoriously short," Mr Khan warned. "Present food surpluses and new issues, with their articulate claims on shrinking aid funds, have given rise to dangerous complacency."

He pointed out that the disparities between the rural poor and urban elites continue to fester. These carry the potential for conflict in the future and may cause "basket cases" to reappear in Asia.

"Even as we push towards the new frontiers in the 1990s, we cannot slacken in our efforts to ensure justice and support for the impoverished and malnourished," he concluded. — *Depthnews Asia*

## To the Editor...

### No more riots

Sir, After the dastardly demolition of the historic Babri Mosque by the fanatic Hindus in Ayodhya, riots broke out in different places of India and Pakistan. And Bangladesh is no exception. These religious strifes have already taken toll of hundreds of invaluable human lives in the region. It has also caused a massive material loss. But the overall situation of Bangladesh is better than that of India and even Pakistan since the majority of the people of Bangladesh are by nature tolerant and also secular.

Secularism is a great lesson of Islam, the religion of peace. Our dearest Prophet (Sm) is the personification of secularism. He has practised it throughout his life and he could forgive the defeated inhabitants of Mecca by dint of this character. We, the Muslims of Bangladesh, as his followers, can also boast of rearing a secular feeling.

Islam teaches us to be respectful to other religions. But some vested quarters are trying to spread the venom of communalism in Bangladesh. Some newspapers are playing their provocative role in this regard. One or two of such dailies are very tactfully trying to provoke our peace-loving Muslims virtually against the innocent, harmless Hindus of Bangladesh through misleading news about the law and order situation in India which is now reported to be almost under control.

One such newspaper had also played the same role during the Ershad regime in 1990 and was banned. Now it is again acting in the same manner to incite the wrath of Bangladesh Muslims against the innocent Hindus. This is a direct violation of the norms of sound journalism which stands for the welfare of the society at large.

Actually, such playing of news serves the heinous purpose of creating a religious strife which is against the image of Bangladesh that stands for harmony. On the eve of the revered Victory Day as well as the prestigious SAARC Summit this sort of motives or acts are simply undesirable. We must consider our national interest above everything partisan and

communal harmony must remain undisturbed by all means. Otherwise our economic development will be a far cry. We, the people of Bangladesh, should remain alert against whatever nasty designs of reactionaries. We hope our democratic government will take all necessary measures against such moves or acts as are detrimental to our national interest and image. And we just don't like to experience any riot any more.

Rushayad Ehsan Supal  
Mohammadpur, Dhaka

### Hamidur's Shahid Minar

Sir, There should be strong agreement with Star's editorial of Nov 20 that architect Hamidur Rahman of the Shahid Minar deserves the recognition and publicity due to him for the brilliant, inspired and original design of this national monument.

As a test case, if a street survey were taken today to ask a cross section of the public to identify Hamidur Rahman, the guess is that more than 80 per cent would fail. Why? The society is responsible for the answer.

In the developing societies, it takes longer to spot a genius, and originality and creativity are not readily pointed out by the top elite of the society. Certain fields are 'popular' to the public, as certain works are more readily recognized and identified by those who design to sit over judgement on works of originality. Unfortunately architecture is not one of the favourites of the myopic critics and judges.

According to my opinion, Hamidur Rahman's Shahid Minar is one of the top pieces of architecture of the 20th century, after having seen what is there to be seen in about 40 countries. Another outstanding work is the Bahai Centre near Delhi, the next most beautiful building in India after the Taj Mahal.

Hamidur's use of geometric science is in the finest tradition of Islamic art, modernized in a clear, austere functional form to inspire any visitor, compelling the mind to pay homage to the grandeur of the

human spirit. In the field of art, if lesser Bangladeshis can be pushed to the top of the scale in national adoration, the neglect of Hamidur Rahman is a cultural lapse of the highest magnitude. He does not deserve to be a hero, he is one in the silence of his greatness.

A Mawaz  
Dhaka

### English language

Sir, Sometimes ago a correspondent writing in your letter columns objected to the wrong spelling of 'convenor'. In fact, while the Concise Oxford has given only one spelling, Chambers recognises both the variants. But something more important than variation of spelling is at issue. The other day (12/12) I was reading your daily when in the front page I came across the expression 'A Hindu temple was ransacked and 12 dwelling houses were torched (sic) there.'

Please note, I am not insensitive to the chilling implication of this single sentence in the tragic news story and I am sorry I had to quote it at all for a secondary purpose.

For 'torch' I am certainly not blaming the writer. This ugly use of 'torch' as a verb, meaning to set aflame, is one of the gems recently added to the English language by American journalists. This one-word use saves newsprint space as well as cost of cabling, but there is a limit upto which nouns can be used as verb without injuring the balance and subtlety of the language. Grammar may be important but idiom and usage are, if expressions like 'torched the house' are encouraged then we should be prepared to read in American newspapers 'Bangladeshis rice (eat rice) twice a day' and 'rivering (river cruising) on the Buriganga is a delightful experience. Happily, reputed writers of English in the subcontinent are not yet given to such loose expressions.

My appeal to you, Mr Editor, please help save the English language from the hands of the English speaking (mainly American) journalists.

Zakaria Shirazi  
Dhaka

## OPINION

### Clinton's Foreign Policy

Choudhury M Shamim

When he is inaugurated on January 20, 1993, President Bill Clinton will be the single most powerful person in the world. The United States of America is the sole military superpower in the world today with a defense budget of \$297 billion dollars. The number two economic superpower Japan has a defense budget of only one-tenth the size of America. Moreover, the US Constitution makes the President the primary executor of American foreign policy. And yet in his first post-election news conference last week not a single global issue was there in Clinton's list of top priorities. It is no wonder therefore that the world is watching with unusual trepidation because the President-elect's foreign policy instincts are still largely unknown.

DOMESTIC ECONOMY: "The No. 1 foreign affairs problem is the domestic economy," said Robert E Hunter, a vice president of a Washington think-tank and a possible Clinton aide. Newspapers across the United States feature banner headlines about Clinton's plans to spur the growth of the American economy. There is fear among America's trading partners that the new democratic administration may foster protectionism against foreign imports. Americans want a level playing field and there is more talk of "fair trade", "managed trade" than "free trade."

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS: During the presidential debates I heard President-elect Clinton mentioning that one way he will try to close the US budget deficit is by taxing foreign corporations. For a long time nobody knew Clinton's position on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between US, Canada and Mexico. Finally, a few weeks before the election, Bill Clinton said he can support NAFTA only after a number of changes are made. Thus, the future of NAFTA is uncertain. Ross Perot in the presidential debates was highly critical of NAFTA and strongly opposed it, claiming that an inordinate amount of American jobs would head South to Mexico as a result of this agreement. And Bill Clinton's number one priority is to create jobs in America. But American economic growth is inextricably linked to global economic growth. Unless the world economy improves, the

American economy will continue to struggle. Bill Clinton must provide leadership among the Group of 7 and foster cooperation within the Bonn-Tokyo-Washington axis. Without American initiative the global economy will continue to flounder. Clinton must resolve the outstanding trade issue with the European Community and smooth trade frictions with Japan. The ECONOMIST newsweekly recently reported that if GATT trade talks are successful, then global trade will get a boost of another 100 billion dollars. This will not only boost the developed economies but will also help Bangladesh and similar economies.

FOREIGN POLICY: Bill Clinton won the US election by posing as the champion of domestic issues. He emphasized that George Bush has neglected the American domestic economy while indulging his taste for international affairs. Clinton promised to remedy the situation. The fact that Clinton won shows how concerned the average American is about the state of the economy. And Clinton knows that he must deliver or lose the next election in 1996. The day after his election victory Clinton emphasized the continuity of American foreign policy. He gravely reassured world leaders by nothing: "Today I want to reaffirm the essential continuity of American foreign policy. I urge American's friends and foe's alike to recognize..." That even as America's administration change America's fundamental interests do not.

Clinton then went on to make international telephone calls to Russian President Boris N Yeltsin, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Japanese Prime Minister Kijiri Miyazawa, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, and others. This shows that an American President cannot ignore the demands of an uncertain and volatile post-Cold War world. According to a number of foreign policy experts Clinton is likely to stick with many Bush Administration policies to a perhaps surprising degree. The Clinton foreign policy is geared to crisis deferral rather than crisis management. The idea is to push aside foreign policy problems without getting bogged down so as to concentrate on the domestic is-

issues like job creation, deficit reduction, and health care reform among others. The rest of the world will not get the attention that it may like as the Clinton administration will be very much pre-occupied with domestic affairs. But the global uncertainty may waylay the best laid plans. Woodrow Wilson's domestic agenda for the US was swept away by the onset of World War I. Similarly, Lyndon B. Johnson's quest for building America into a "great society" was torpedoed by the Vietnam War. Clinton will need both luck and political acumen. He has the qualifications. At age 46 he is handsome, intelligent and energetic. He showed his energy during the election, campaigning non-stop in the last days. Several times I saw on television that his voice gave out but he plowed on. He is said to draw enormous energy from the crowd. A Rhodes scholar he spent a couple of years at Oxford University and travelled through many European countries including the former Soviet Union. Once he enters the White House and wears the mantle of world leader it may be difficult to skirt the great game of international relations and foreign policy.

ECONOMIC SECURITY COUNCIL: In the field of international relations Clinton is emphasizing International Political Economy rather than International Security. During the Cold War, traditional American foreign policy was concerned with military, political and security issues. The overarching framework of American foreign policy prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union was the theory of "Containment" expounded by George Kennan in 1947. This policy was coordinated by the National Security Council by such celebrated NSC advisers like Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. During his tenure Clinton wants to give equal weight to US economic interest. He has announced his intention to create an Economic Security Council in the White House to counterbalance the traditional National Security Council. In this fundamental sense there lies the potential that Clinton may radically change the course of American foreign policy in the future.

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