

A Call from Sharif

In the backdrop of continuing concern in the region over unresolved bilateral problems between members of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), problems which undoubtedly cast a shadow over the seven-nation alliance, it is perfectly understandable that Pakistan Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif should offer a few ideas of his own as to how SAARC members should deal with this situation. These ideas reflect not only the interest of Islamabad in the resolution of these problems but also a commitment to the concept of a peaceful and progressive South Asia whose economic growth receives due support from regional co-operation.

The views from Sharif, provided through a written exclusive interview with the United News of Bangladesh (UNB), centre on one major proposal. While making a case for intensive talks on bilateral political problems — there should be no dispute on this point — the Pakistani leader hopes "it will be possible for member states to set aside the stipulation in the charter disallowing discussion of contentious bilateral problems in SAARC forum." It is far from clear if Sharif would propose an amendment of the SAARC charter during the Summit here next week along the lines suggested in the interview or he is only testing the public opinion. To be on the safe side, let us assume that this idea is presented for further discussion among opinion-makers in South Asia, even if it is not formally taken up at the officials' meeting of SAARC here.

In some ways, bilateral problems among member nations of SAARC are taken up during a Summit of the alliance, but informally on one-to-one basis outside the formal deliberation. Since these talks are held in an informal atmosphere, without any agenda and often without any officials present, there is always a good chance of such meetings leading to a personal rapport between two leaders — indeed, any two leaders — often paving the way for detailed discussion between the two countries at the level of officials or even among the heads of governments. True, in the past summits, these informal talks among the leaders on their bilateral issues did not produce much results. But that's because even the formal meetings of heads of governments were held under all kinds of constraints. Once the seven-nation alliance moves into the era of smooth sailing, as it may well happen during 1993, there should be an improvement in the climate not only for joint ventures but also for informal talks on bilateral issues during a Summit but outside the purview of formal deliberation.

Whatever may be the merits of the proposal from Sharif, which are yet to be explained by the Pakistani leader, there are at least three immediate problems we will face if the SAARC charter is amended along the lines suggested by Pakistan. First, how would we decide as to which bilateral issue should be taken up by SAARC and thus regionalised, and which ones should remain outside the concern of the grouping? Secondly, would implicit regionalisation of an issue like Kashmir, the demolition of the Babri Masjid or the water sharing dispute between Dhaka and New Delhi help in the resolution of any of these disputes? Last but not the least, wouldn't the change suggested by Prime Minister Sharif divert attention of the grouping from pressing issues of economic co-operation, ranging from the setting up of a preferential trade arrangement to joint industrial ventures. From gradual elimination of tariff barriers to South Asian drive for foreign investment. This is an area where so much can be done. Here any change of focus or even an expansion of our area of commitments would hurt the future of SAARC.

Asians Grow Bigger

The height of average Asian children is increasing at a remarkable rate. This disclosure has come from a Hong Kong-based nutrition association. The growth has been attributed to more and better food Asians have been consuming for some years now. Taller and heavier children are certainly going to be considered a positive trend because it will ultimately account for bigger and stronger generations. The change in dietary habit is however not an unmixed blessing. Certain diseases not known for their high incidence in this part of the world are now becoming the accompanying ills. Considering the plus and minus points, how are we then going to accept the news of this development?

The big news for us in South Asia is that the percentage of chronically undernourished Asians dropped from 40 per cent in 1969-71 to 19 per cent in 1988-90. The bigger share of nutritious food for the South Asians means they are growing bigger than their earlier generations. The question that has however not been answered is if the benefit of this nutritious food has reached the lowest level of society. Getting bigger and heavier does not necessarily mean to be healthier also. But still there are certainly a number of advantages that can more than offset the disadvantages. On this count, the addition of more nutritious values to the dishes of the Asians should be welcomed.

What however needs to be taken into consideration is the high incidence of cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, diabetes, certain cancers and obesity. Eating more and higher cholesterol food cannot be considered healthy. Reduction of fat from diet is not going to affect the growth of the children. A reasonable portion of meat well balanced by vegetables and fish can be considered ideal for the healthy growth of children as well as their elders. But the consumption of too much of meaty food — contemptuously called junk food — is increasingly becoming popular among the Asians. The fatty, fast and prepared food are no doubt convenient for a section of people to eat but is no less unsuitable for a healthy body.

The contents of food or the dietary habits go with the culture and tradition of a people. Imitation of the Western way of life might have something to do with the change in the dietary trend. But replacing our dishes with those of the Western ones will be unwise simply because of the different nature of climates. A combination of the two through a judicious selection can bring about the right dish for us.

WHETHER Broadcasting in Bangladesh in the 90s?

Satellite dish antennas are allowed on the roof tops, and CNN is being relayed by Bangladesh Television. There is a roaring business in VCPs, led by the mohalla (locality) video-rental shops, and there is no shortage of camcorder coverages of the wedding ceremonies. In the audio field, there are digital CDs (compact disc) in the posh homes. The local printing industry is hungry for the big apple, but the small publishers still prefer to be hand-fed by hand-set type faces.

High and new technology in the electronic mass media has no respect for money or poverty in the emerging countries, and has penetrated the vertical layers, although the horizontal expansion has to be restricted due to low circulation of money. There is no captive audience in the 90s, hence BTV and the film makers have to face new challenges in this information age. BTV continues to be lucky, but not for long, as more alternative channels have not yet proliferated, and the purchasing power of the average audience is low.

To return to the initial question, it is necessary to grasp the background scenario. Broadcasting is not only new technology, but also very high technology, operating at the very frontiers of science (space, digital wizardry, optical

fibres, VLSI chips, AI, and what not). That means there are several limiting factors for those who deal with it professionally and at the national policy-making levels: the technology is changing so fast that it is quite a task to keep pace with it, not to speak of mastering it. This profession has become so specialized that the experts cannot be side-tracked — only they can point out the various long-term options available with any degree of reliability (the developing countries should not waste foreign exchange tying up with the wrong short-life systems).

The latest text books lag behind by a few years, hence the study of periodical literature cannot be ignored, even in the developing countries, as the electronic mass media will need to be updated continuously due to high redundancy rate of equipment in use, and non-availability of spares after a few years. This is all the more important in countries with low literacy, as the audio-visual medium more than supplement the role of the printed medium to a very large extent. This AV medium is more than radio and television broadcasting, as we shall see in the following paragraphs.

While using a high-tech system, the planning process has to be continuous, regardless of the ad hoc or periodical needs of the nation. One of the inputs to the planners comes from the monitoring of the changing global technology. There are

by AMMA'abad

other inputs, such as studies, evaluation, the changing international standards or modifications, pre-feasibility exercises. Participation in special-interest conferences is a must, to economise on the long-term effects of project budgets.

The DCs (developing countries) have to be alert to two problems: technical compatibility (equipment and systems), and new equipment which might not be compatible with existing equipment. Decades earlier, it was possible to ignore new developments, as the rate of change was slow (compare with automobile engineering); now, in this field, it would be impractical to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. Colour television did not wait, nor did the VCP, now seen in the village teashops, or the home dish (of satellite broadcasting).

Today there is no captive audience in the electronic media, hence the planners can ignore this reality at great national peril (and that of the market forces). A bird in hand is worth two in the bush — woo the audience before they leave for greener pastures. Bangladesh has taken two bold and realistic steps: allowed the use of the home dish antenna (only 300 set up so far), and the relay by BTV of the CNN International news service. The lakh taka question is how to keep the BTV audience rating high (excluding the news

bulletins). The efforts of the administration will be watched with interest. The lack of a second channel is imposing non-general audience programmes (educational, sports, rural) during peak or odd hours on the single channel.

A new field to watch is cable TV or CATV. It is distribution of several channels of TV programmes (up to 10) via cable to the homes on subscription basis (the telephone is remote talking service using cables). The cable radio service had been in existence for many decades. The introduction of fibre optics has greatly accelerated the development of CATV in the industrialised countries.

CATV is quite useful in the DCs, and has many advantages compared to the traditional wireless broadcasting (known as terrestrial broadcasting), and can supplement the traditional broadcasting network, in the areas where the reception is weak. The CATV reception quality is better, and within control (no antenna and propagation problems), as it is free of electromagnetic disturbances (and also does not cause such disturbance); the channel capacity is large since allocation is independent of station frequency plan (as per ITU regulations). One CATV system can handle upto 100,000 subscribers.

For example, in the People's Republic of China,

CATV is becoming popular in the mofussil areas. During the period 1980-90, CATV systems boomed from 5,000 to 30,000, serving 15 million subscribers (about 10 per cent of the total TV sets in China). CATV can also be combined with cable radio.

Experts predict that satellite broadcasting and cable distribution will become major modes in the future. In a big country such as India, which has to cover large areas with multiple language programmes, her domestic satellite INSAT has wrought a revolution in the application of the electronic mass media. Bangladesh has been spared such exercise due to the compactness of the land and the homogeneity of culture.

The introduction of CATV in a country such as Bangladesh appears to be premature at present, due to the dependence on the market forces, as the increase in the number of subscribers is related to the capability to meet the subscription charges (the TV set may also be rented just like a telephone).

The private sector may be encouraged to go ahead with a CATV service in the capital city of Dhaka, before the feasibility in the small cities could be assessed. In the developed countries, things have gone further, with the computer at home acting as a multi-information-cum-entertainment control centre, handling data, voice, audio/radio, video

(live/tapes), graphics, telephone, fax, electronic shopping, etc.

The computerisation of the radio and TV broadcast news room has now become standard, greatly speeding up the processing of the large number of the daily news bulletins in a number of languages. Standard set of equipment are now available for quick installation, with short learning curve for the new operators (the professional editors). BTV and RB, who are members of ABU (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union), can get ready help and advice from the advanced members.

With digitalization and miniaturization of solid state technology, the costs are coming down rapidly. The maintenance is no longer a nightmare in the developing countries (although reorientation training courses are a must), with the advent of modular construction and plug-in components and boards, and self-diagnostic probes embedded in the circuits, which display the faults on the screen, ensuring low off-time period. Hence upgrading in a developing country is well within the bonds of possibility.

To compete, and to hold the audience, BTV has to do some homework. The writer is a former Director of the Kuala Lumpur based Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) and had previously worked for Radio Bangladesh and Bangladesh Television.

Scared New World: Farming Could Lag behind Baby Boom

DESPITE shifts in diets and incomes, the key food-crop for tropical Asia in the 21st century will remain rice. But traditional and modern agricultural systems that produced this rice, as well as other food crops in abundance, are now faltering. And without careful management, these systems could slip behind rapid population increases by the year 2000.

Scientists from Japan, United States and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) sketched out this complex scenario in a symposium here on "Asian Agriculture Towards the 21st Century."

The three scientists were: Professor Emeritus Yoshiaki Ishizuka from Hokkaido University; Oregon State University agricultural economist Ludwig Eisgruber and FAO Regional Representative A Z M Obaidullah Khan.

The three agreed that by the year 2025, world population could be anywhere between 9 billion and 20 billion people — depending on how family planning programmes bite. To feed these multitudes, agriculture must quadruple current output.

"This is an impossible figure for our agricultural scientists," the 85-year-old Professor Ishizuka said. "In any case this is a world I will not live to see."

To produce sufficient food for Asians of the 21st century is a "staggering task that has

been complicated by lags in agrarian and structural reforms," Mr Khan of FAO added. "Easier options such as expansion of cultivated lands or immigration have already been used up."

But simply drifting back to traditional systems of agriculture runs into a dead end, Dr Eisgruber warned. Historically, these old systems grew only at most 1 per cent a year. "What is needed are agricultural systems providing food supplies that increase at an annual rate of at least 1 per cent to 2 per cent — and on a sustainable basis," the American scientist said.

Modern farming systems do produce at such levels. But they demand large inputs of water, fertilisers and other chemicals. This approach cannot be maintained — specially in Asia where impoverished small farmers till the land.

Asian agriculture in the 21st century is therefore squeezed between the horns of a dilemma: needed production cannot be assured either by traditional or existing modern systems. The first is unable to produce enough. The second is not sustainable.

To break out of an emerging chaotic dilemma, Asia must pour in brains, time and funds for stepped up research, education and technology. Research in the 1990s, the three scientists agreed, must shift away from the traditional concerns of recent decades.

Priorities should also be given to enhance land, water and other resources. "New produc-

A Special Correspondent writes from Kyushu, Japan

Agriculture must quadruple current output to feed a population between 9 billion and 20 billion by year 2025. This is an impossible figure for agricultural scientists

tion practices should facilitate substitution of biological technology for today's chemical technology," the American economist said.

Technology emerging in the 1990s, from the "new frontiers" opened by biotechnology and communications, could be monopolised by a few companies. Once again they may bypass small farmers. The FAO representative warned: "Technological imperialism is not merely a warmed-over slogan; it can distort essential work for enhanced food security."

"Nonetheless, in the 21st century, the key crop in tropical Asia will continue to be rice," the Japanese scientist predicted. Research into untapped but ecologically brittle uplands needs to move up priority lists.

For example, research into tropical fruits, vegetables, spices, herbs and industrial crops on marginal lands has lagged. This gap must be rapidly closed, through beefed-up national research, underpinned by international action.

The three speakers told agricultural scientists, assembled at Kyushu University, they could be trapped by their own

specialisations. "Agricultural scientists have traditionally tended to ignore the very complex cultural, economic, social and political issues," Dr Eisgruber observed.

One such issue in the 21st century is the impact of educational advances. Farmers will no longer be satisfied simply to

be farm labourers, Professor Ishizuka pointed out. They will want to manage plantations by themselves.

And Mr Khan warned that fascination with "new frontier" technology can sap essential support for drab but essential programmes. These range from curbing post-harvest losses to long-term support for small farmers.

The 1990s would also see emerging constraints. Water shortages, for example, could cripple production. Effective management and recycling of irrigation water needs urgent attention. Some Asian scientists already use productivity

per unit of water as a measuring tool.

Asia must also breed new varieties tolerant of adverse environments, specially for flooded areas or semi-arid uplands. This will be an important target for geneticists in the 21st century. And diminishing returns of increased fertiliser call for a broad review of chemical inputs.

"The type and scope of research and technology needed in the 21st century is of such immensity and complexity that no one country — or even region — should or can shoulder the entire cost," Dr Eisgruber stressed. — *Depthnews Asia*

OPINION

More on Ali's Commentary against Hasina

Zillur Rahman

I have noted with great disappointment that Mr. S M Ali has chosen, once again, to reiterate his strident attacks on Sheikh Hasina. He has also chosen to make certain impolite remarks about me in a subsequent article. His rather extreme reaction is inexplicable to me but he seems to have been hurt by my remarks about his lack of professional objectivity and honesty. I do not remember reading his 'signed commentaries' on many irresponsible public statements made by Khaleda Zia about the 'conspiracy' being hatched by the Awami League against the country's interests. The Daily Star of 23 December carried one of her latest statements insinuating that such a conspiracy was afoot. She neither explained her remarks nor gave any evidence to substantiate her allegations. There cannot be anything more irresponsible than such unsubstantiated public statements by the Prime Minister of the country and yet the distinguished Editor of The Daily Star did not deem it necessary to write a front-page commentary on it. Can there be anything more convincing to prove his lack of professional integrity? Instead of offering justifications for what he has written, he should reflect on the disservice he has done to honest journalism in Bangladesh.

Mr S M Ali seems to have missed the central point that Sheikh Hasina made in her statement. The leader of the Islamic fundamentalist party of this country goes to India to meet the leader of the Hindu fundamentalist party. Is there not something bizarre about this strange meeting? What is even more intriguing is that the Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh has gone out of the way to put the entire responsibility for the destruction of the Babri mosque on the Congress party. Not a word from the Jamaat against Advani. What does it suggest to Mr Ali? Unless he has shut his mind to logic and objective thinking he would surely discover the link. The least that Mr S M Ali could do to salvage his reputation for honest journalism was to ask for some clarification from Nizami about what transpired at this meeting between Advani and Nizami. Unless he thinks it is the most natural thing for Jamaat and BJP to fraternize with each other, he would have found some substance in Sheikh Hasina's remarks on this meeting. The whole country shares the concern that Sheikh Hasina has expressed about this link between the fundamentalists of the two countries.

On the question of the "push-in" policy of India, Mr S M Ali does not see any link between what was written in Clause 11 of the joint communique and the actual operation undertaken by India. I invite Mr Ali's attention to a news item published by The Daily Star on Indian Foreign Secretary Dixit's claim that as many as 10 million nationals of Bangladesh are living in India. Does it not corroborate what the communique referred to as "large-scale immigration" of people? Let me refresh his memory by quoting from his paper about the link between the communique and the push-in operation. Mr Dixit, talking about the "push-back" operation during an interview said, "The matter was raised not as an operation of moving people back but as one of illegal immigration. It was raised when your Prime Minister came here and I brought it up with Bangladesh Secretaries for Foreign Affairs and Home when I was in Dhaka last August. See, as I told them, the numbers (of immigrants) are large and the trend is increasing. So we will be taking some definite action which will be little more visible. I said that, so that there is no unnecessary misunderstanding." These remarks by the Indian Foreign Secretary prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the operation push-back was a logical follow-up of the agreement embodied in Clause 11 of the joint communique. Sheikh Hasina was not making any insinuations but merely stating a fact. The blunder that the Prime Minister had committed during her Delhi visit will haunt Bangladesh for a long time to come. Sheikh Hasina spoke on it in the Parliament but the Prime Minister chose to remain silent. Mr S M Ali never thought it necessary to ask why the Prime Minister did not offer any explanation. Does she not owe it to the nation? It is baffling why such plain speaking by Sheikh Hasina should upset Mr Ali. As a responsible public leader it is her duty to expose the mistakes and weaknesses of the government. The Prime Minister's weakness in defending the interests of the country must have been noted by the Indian hosts including Advani. The extremists in India might have been encouraged to believe that the present Bangladesh government is so weak that it would not protest their activities against the interests of Bangladesh as well as those of the Muslims.

Mr S M Ali and his colleague Mr Anam believe that they are being generous to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by putting him on an equal footing with late Ziaur Rahman. The father of the nation cannot be equated with anyone else. It does not prove their impartiality; on the contrary, it is really a part of the BNP campaign to distort history by denying the historic role that Bangabandhu played in mobilizing the Bengali nation and liberating them from Pakistani rule. Has it ever occurred to Mr Ali that Late President Ziaur Rahman never explained why he had to give protection to the self-confessed killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Let Mr S M Ali write a front-page commentary on the Prime Minister's favourite theme of conspiracies; let him write on the Advani-Nizami meeting; let him comment on Mr Dixit's statement on the presence of Bangladesh nationals in India and its link with the push-in-policy and only then can he claim journalistic objectivity. Mr Ali cannot set his own standards of objectivity and then feel hurt if others do not agree with him. In the signed commentary Mr Ali has betrayed his hostility towards the President of the Awami League. The harsh and intemperate language used by him in attacking a public leader was not an example of responsible journalism. It is regrettable that the reputation of a distinguished journalist is getting tarnished in this manner at this stage of his career.

Sheikh Hasina is doing her duty as the President of Awami League and the Leader of the Opposition by pointing out the failures of the government in different fields. The economy is stagnant; unemployment is on the increase; corruption is rampant; despite the passage of a new black law the law and order situation is deteriorating; the Rohingya refugees are still living on Bangladesh soil and India is attempting, from time to time, to send Indian nationals across the border to Bangladesh. What is wrong in calling a spade a spade? Will Mr Ali be happy if Sheikh Hasina stops calling attention to these glaring failures of the BNP government?

I would not like to continue this controversy with Mr S M Ali. He has come back to the country after a long period of absence and we all wish him well. But in order to protect his credibility and journalistic reputation he should think harder next time when he attacks a national leader.

The writer is the General Secretary of the Bangladesh Awami League.

To the Editor

Immigration to UK

Sir, Bangladeshi community living in the UK is very small numbering about one lakh. Compared to this, number of Indians, Pakistanis, and Caribbeans permanently residing in the UK is many times more. Hence our foreign ministry should take up a case with the UK government for liberalisation of immigration rules for the Bangladeshis. If the matter is explained to the British government properly it is likely that they will take a liberal view for immigration of Bangladeshis to the UK.

At the moment many Bangladeshi nationals cannot visit their families residing in the UK due to strict immigration laws. The case of such people should be viewed from humanitarian angle, specially, because number of Bangladeshis in the UK is very small.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment

Let's ask Pakistan

Sir, After nine years of dictatorship, the ordinary citizen has got quite unused to the practice of his democratic rights. However, with our honourable Information Minister leading the way, I feel duty bound to follow in his steps. The matter I want to touch upon, though, is a fairly sensitive one and I hope I shall be able to deal with it with the same degree of finesse that the minister does.

The question that seems to raise hackles these days appears to be this: 'Who' is more responsible for the independence of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib or General Zia? Personally, I'm willing to accept that the egg is made of both the yolk and the white. However, since the minister seems determined to split

hairs in this matter, why don't we ask the one who should know — Pakistan. Since they were clearly the ones in the driving seat prior to losing the East, let us put a simple question to them. In their view, who was a greater pain in their neck and who do they hold responsible — Sheikh Mujib or General Zia? An answer from them should put the debate to rest.

Shafiq Rahman
Char Kamlapur, Faridpur

Foreign mission's behaviour

Sir, A four-member delegation including me from National Association of UNESCO Clubs in Bangladesh which is the only organisation recognised by the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO, Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh, was invited to participate in the seminar in Paris by the French UNESCO Club Federation and World Federation of UNESCO Clubs, Centres and Associations (WFUCA). All necessary papers and guarantee letter were given to the invitees. The Education Ministry also provided with the Government Order and Ministry of Foreign Affairs also provided certificate to extend visa to French Embassy in Dhaka. But it is with deep regret we have to mention that French Embassy declined to issue visa in spite of submitting all the necessary papers. The visa clerk at the counter rather misbehaved with us and even did not allow us to talk to the visa officer. We feel that as citizens of a sovereign country we should get the reciprocal behaviour.

Does any French national ever get this kind of treatment from the Bangladesh Embassy in Paris? It is our earnest request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to look into the matter, since the prestige of Bangladesh is involved in the issue.

Mahbubuddin Chowdhury
Secretary-General,
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Mohammad Shahjahan
remembered

Sir, Being a regular subscriber to your newspaper — the remarkable part of which is factual reporting and non-partisan stand — I was sad to note a omission in the yearly round-up published in your new year issue.

In the obituary reference you have justifiably remembered late Syed Altaf Hossain and Ratan Sen. But this remembrance is marred by the omission of the name of Mohammad Shahjahan, the organiser-participant and veteran of the Liberation War, trade unionist and politician.

I myself do not subscribe to his politics, but a personality of his stature has to be regarded with due respect. The nation owes to him its glorious birth. He will not come back from the 'freedom-fighters' graveyard to claim anything, but the nation, for its own advancement, has to remember him, one of the great patriots, and finest sons of the soil.

Amir Ali
Postagola, Dhaka

The omission is regretted. Many things could not be accommodated due to space constraint. Edr.