

A Glimpse of an Authoritarian UN Official; a Visit to the University; and a Message from Delhi

WHEN the Director General enters this room at 10 am," said the press officer in his polished English that had a faint touch of Oxbridge accent, "you are requested to stand up to greet him."

Some 100-odd journalists from all parts of the world who were present there for a briefing on an international conference starting the following day looked astonished. Meanwhile, the press officer continued with his more detailed instructions, now appearing a bit nervous, perhaps about the reaction from assembled reporters to what some of us thought were his pathetic pleas although he managed to present them as advice.

The Director General will be with us for an hour. He will make a short statement and then answer four to five questions, preferably no supplementaries. According to his time schedule which is very tight, he will leave this room just at 11. So, ladies and gentlemen, the Director General will be with you for one whole hour." (He emphasised the words, whole hour!)

The press officer thus concluded his statement and sat down, looking pleased as if he had performed the most difficult task of the day, setting the stage for the grand entrance of his boss for the meeting with the world press.

One woman journalist quipped, addressing the press officer by his first name, "Nick, just in case I forget to stand up, could I just greet him with a smile or just say, Hi, Director General, how are you doing?"

Apparently, Nick had not anticipated this question.

"Maybe," he responded with a nervous laugh, "women journalists should be excused from standing up to greet the Director General. It is fine if you just smile."

Then, after another pause, Nick added, "Well, we cannot have one set of rules for women and another for men. So, let me say this, all this is optional. For heaven's sake, just do not ask him any awkward question."

In a matter of minutes, the boss arrived.

This was my first and so far the last meeting with Eduardo Souma, the Director General of the Rome-based Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). The Lebanese-born chief of this all-important UN agency was in the news a few days ago in connection with the election of his successor, due in November. The report made a reference to his "authoritarian style" which, for all these years, had evoked considerable criticism from several member countries, including the United States, the largest donor to FAO. Yet, somehow or other, Souma has managed to remain at the head of FAO for three unprecedented terms.

If member countries have been critical of the chief of the UN agency for his arbitrary recruitment policy, extravagant spending methods and somewhat questionable budgetary style, people inside FAO have been obliged to put up with Souma's haughty abrasive treatment of the staff, sometimes even of diplomats of member countries who would call on him on official business.

Looking back, I can see why the press officer of the Conference on Rural Poverty, organised by FAO in late seventies, was so nervous about how his boss would be received by the international media. After all, this was the time when leading dailies in the West had started going after Souma for all his acts of omissions and commissions.

A few days later, Nick confided to a few of us, over dinner, that he could upset his journalist friends with his absurd requests rather than run the risk of incurring the displeasure of his "impossible boss."

Years ago, the late U Thant, then the Secretary General of the UN came under fire of a section of the US press for his "extravagant" life style. The former school teacher of Burma was made to look guilty of all kinds of offences, including having a hair cut at a fashionable barber shop at Manhattan for \$100!

LAST Monday, I paid a long overdue visit to the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism in the Dhaka University. Before going over to the Department, I found myself in the auditorium of the Teachers Students Centre (TSC), facing a couple of hundred students, all potential media practitioners, and their teachers. I was there to fulfil a commitment, to deliver what was rather ceremoniously called a "special lecture" on "Development Journalism: Prospects and Challenges." I do not know if there was anything special about it. But our newsdesk broke a house

ternity. Then, all that we hear about and write about — the campus violence, the political infighting and the killing of students — seemed far away, remote and totally irrelevant.

Facing my audience during my talk and later in a lively question-answer session, I felt convinced — I am sure, I was not imagining things — that here was a segment of the silent majority that had been pushed out of the centre stage, almost marginalised, by forces over which the university authorities had lost control. True, I did not individually know these earnest young men and women who filled the auditorium. Yet, I knew for sure — it was almost an instinctive feeling — that while many of them had strong political views of their own, just as we had in our university days, they were a great deal for their studies, for their careers in communication and journalism, even about starting new publications. Perhaps some dreamt about going abroad for higher studies, some were in love and planned to get married, and a few wanted to enter politics one day but without the use of guns and muscle power.

Later, as I drove back to the office, I started feeling bitter, even angry. Why is it that the society — or, to be blunt, our political leaders — cannot give back to this silent majority what is its due, its right? Why is it that these leaders would not face the audience that filled the auditorium on Monday in TSC and talk to these youthful men and women about their studies and careers and share with them a vision for our future? Why is it that they cannot come before these students and their teachers and vow to free the universities and other educational institutions of armed gangs and restore to them the academic atmosphere that had been mercilessly, almost brutally, destroyed?

What have we done with our own lives? And what have we done with the lives of those who are like our own children?

In the noise of the traffic along the Ekphat Road, I did not hear the answers to any of my questions.

NEW Year messages keep coming from friends and acquaintances in different parts of the world. The latest is from Sumania Banerjee, a noted journalist, author and an occasional contributor to The Daily Star, who lives in New Delhi. It says: "From the bottom of my disconsolate soul, I send you my best wishes for 1993, with the prayer that may sanity return to our sub-continent."

What can we say in reply? I wonder.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

Perhaps one should not single out the FAO Chief for his authoritarian style. At one time or another, heads of quite a few UN bodies have faced criticisms on the same score.

It is said that in this respect, the former UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim too was no exception. If nothing else, he was conscious of the fact, almost all the time, that he was the highest ranking international civil servant in the world.

Once a staff member ran into Dr Waldheim in the lift. He greeted him politely, "Good Morning, Dr Waldheim." The UN Chief just nodded.

Within an hour, the staff member received a copy of a memo that had been circulated a year earlier, reminding him that Waldheim must always be addressed as "Mr Secretary General".

Much of it may well be genuine criticisms of the working style of senior officials of the UN system. Unfortunately, they provide ammunition for what has come to be known as UN-bashing, a favourite game for a section of the press in the West. In this game, no issue is out of limits for

rule restricting the publication of any of the speeches by the editor and covered the lecture rather extensively on an inside page, the report being provided by our own enterprising and promising DU Correspondent.

The visit to the University filled me with nostalgia, almost with a vague sense of reunion with my own past. But there were also some sad echoes. I had planned to visit the TSC years ago, in response to repeated calls from our very dear "Baby" Zaman Bhat who ran the centre for years with loving care and dedication. Then, just during the week I had decided to go over to the TSC with a home-made cake, Baby Bhat passed away.

However, once inside the auditorium, I pushed all the sad thoughts out of my mind and focused on the audience, on youthful, earnest faces. I do not know if my talk made much sense, but I felt good, almost wonderful, talking to them about our work in newspapers, telling them jokes and anecdotes and, in the process, becoming friends as members of the same fra-

DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury, Noted Broadcaster, Recalls Some Momentous Events

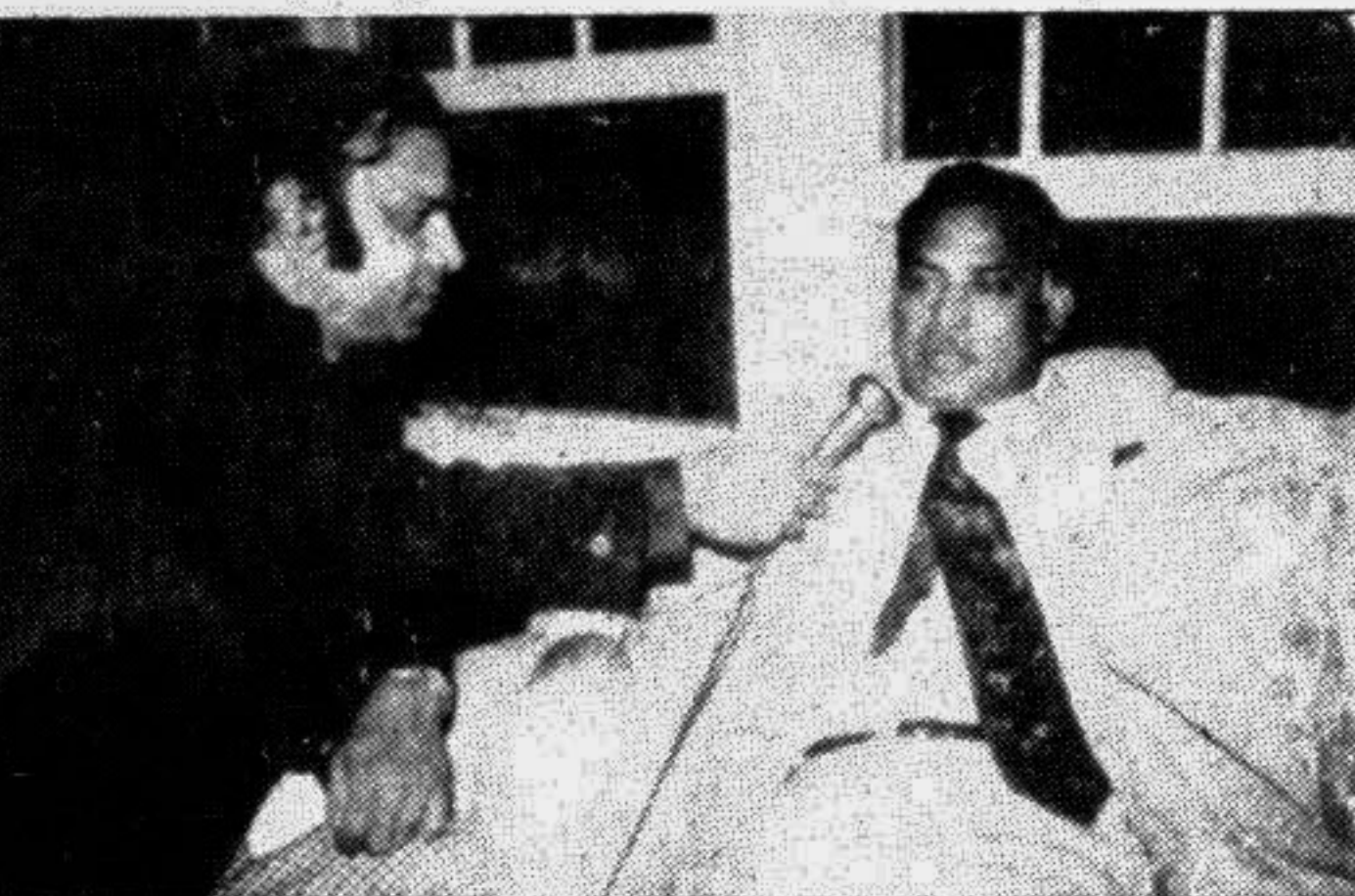
Interviewed by NANCY WONG



In 1974, Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury covered the Washington visit of Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and also interviewed him for VOA. Picture shows — Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury with Bangabandhu at a reception in Washington on October 1, 1974. This was the only visit of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the US as Head of the Government of Bangladesh.

beckoned to him, at the airport in Washington DC. Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury also covered the late President Ziaur Rahman's official visit to the United States and the United Nations during which talks were held with President Carter at the White House. He also interviewed President Zia in Washington.

Speaking of his broadcasting career in the United States, Iqbal disclosed that he was offered a position by the Voice of America in early '73 and he has stayed the course since. For interested listeners, the service transmits news orientated programmes, features, interviews, etc. which include reports from all over the world, two hours every day: one in the morning and one at night. The Bangla broadcast is mainly for Bangladesh and



Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury covered the US visit of President Ziaur Rahman for VOA. Picture shows — Iqbal Bahar Chowdhury interviewing President Zia in Washington on August 27, 1980 after his meeting with the US President. This was the only visit of President Ziaur Rahman to the US as Head of the Government of Bangladesh.

and an ethnic reconciliation," he declares. "For the spiritually-minded it will offer a pilgrimage from the Christian cathedrals of Central Europe, to those of the Russian Orthodox in Moscow to the mosques of Central Asia and Pakistan, to the temples and grand mausoleums of India, to the pagodas of China — the great faiths will all be represented."

Part of the ideas of Stan Mathew, a man convinced and committed to his ideas, may seem Utopian, but great visions come as Utopian until they become a reality.

A Christian by faith, who says he is active in inter-faith much like Swami Vivekananda, Mathew observes, "every person wants to do something significant in his life. My satisfaction is in contributing to beneficial change."

All we have to do is float the concept," he says confidently, "and people are going to jump on it." On the face of it, the United States does not benefit from the proposed project, he notes, but the big US multinationals are waiting to cash in through joint ventures in the region, and they would definitely need better infrastructure. He adds that the new Clinton administration will also perhaps take a more favourable approach towards the project.

With the conviction of a committed campaigner, Mathew observes that the multi-trillion dollar investment over a 10-year period will integrate the Asian economy for accelerated growth and link across Russia with Euro-Rail at Berlin.

The Euro-Asian Railroad will be a religious pilgrimage

West Bengal listeners. VOA broadcasts in 46 languages including Bangla. There are 13 full time staff members in Washington DC for the Bangla Service. There are Bangla stringers in Dhaka, Calcutta and New York. VOA has two news bureaus in South Asia (New Delhi and Islamabad) with one correspondent in each. There is also one stringer in Dhaka for VOA English broadcast.

For the uninitiated, Iqbal explained that VOA is a US government radio organisation and a charter signed by former President Ford ensured among other aims that "VOA news will be accurate, objective and comprehensive" and that it will "present a balanced and comprehensive projection" of all segments of American society. He emphasized that "we make it a point to present a balanced view, we talk with both sides — the government as well as the opposition. For example, during the Watergate scandal, VOA covered all sides, Nixon as well as his opponents." Similarly, during Ershad's fall, he played a leading role along with his colleagues in tracking down the

Opposition in Bangladesh — both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, and managed to get their viewpoints. It is during times of crises such as these that listeners depend more on VOA than the local media as the latter, more often than not, is shut down or forced to toe the government line; whereas a service such as ours offers an impartial and accurate report of events taking place," Iqbal said.

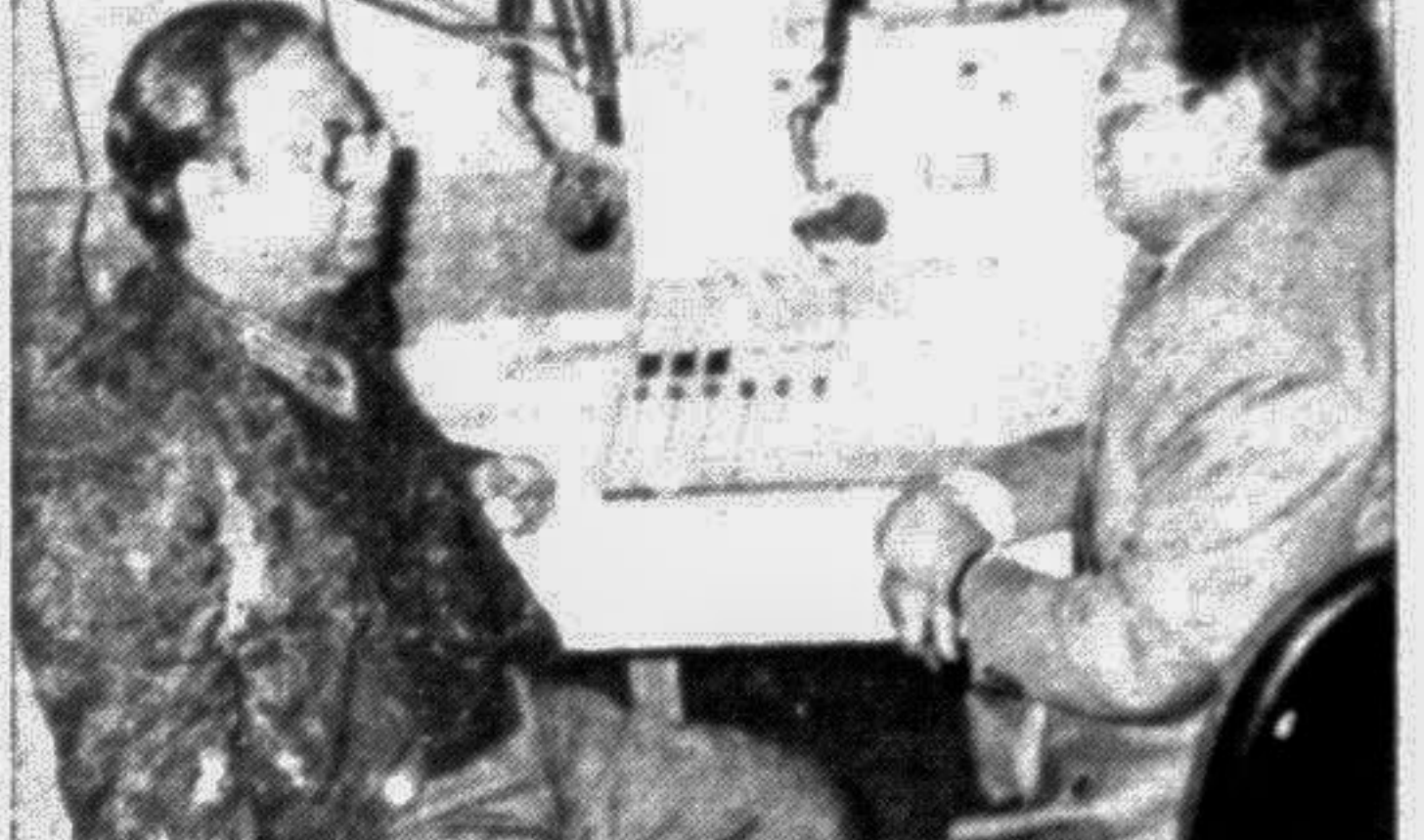
Despite his long sojourn of two decades in the United States, Iqbal has maintained close ties with Bangladesh. He returns frequently for family visits — something he seems to value highly, and is also active in the Bengali communities in the United States. In fact, he initiated the first North America-Bangladesh Conference (which includes Canada) and was Chairman of the organizing committee in '87, which was held in Washington DC. This group organizes seminars as well as literary and cultural events and gets the Bengali families for a big gathering once a year. He was also President of the Bangladesh Association of America from '77-'79 and is

Novelist Shankar Talks to BBC Bengali Service

SHANKAR is a household name in West Bengal and Bangladesh, and is perhaps the most prolific novelist on the present day Bengali literary scene. During a recent visit to London he spoke to Serajur Rahman of the BBC Bengali Service and that interview is being broadcast in the 'Variety' programme on Sunday, 31 January.

Shankar has over 50 published titles to his credit some

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Bengali novelist Shankar (left) interviewed by Serajur Rahman of the BBC Bengali Service.

The Pleasures and Contents of Saraswati Puja

by Fayza Haq

THIS takes place only once a year during winter in the months of 'Paush' and 'Magh' — the worship of goddess Saraswati by the Hindu community. You can hear the voice of the cuckoos during this time. There is then the reawakening of nature, and this inspire your mind and heart. Maybe that is why people celebrate this occasion of nature with Saraswati 'puja.' Saraswati is considered as the goddess of learning and the occasion of this puja is more celebrated by the students than others.

According to old Hindu mythological scripture, "Sri Brahma Babartan Purn", where there is discussion on the worship of the goddess, Sri Narayan explained in his book that it was Sri Krishna who introduced this "puja." He



still actively associated with it. "I, like to keep my links with the people of Bangladesh origin in America," he explained with a warm smile, a smile that, a friend once said, he has inherited from his famous father, the late Habibullah Bahar Chowdhury, the writer, politician who served as a minister in the first provincial government of the erstwhile East Pakistan.

told, furthermore, that an illiterate individual can turn into a scholar, if devoted to, with the help of this goddess. Thus Sri Krishna encouraged the worship of Saraswati.

It is said that goddess Saraswati once desired Sri Krishna. But Sri Krishna gave her instructions that she should abandon this pursuit of amour. He advised her to turn her attention, instead, to Narayan. "In this manner you will always be contented," he said, although Narayan had a wife called Luxmi, the goddess of wealth.

Sri Krishna then assured Saraswati of her future and blessed her furthermore. Thus both the sisters Luxmi and Saraswati, would be happy. He promised the goddess that she would then be worshipped on the 5th day of the sighting of the moon, during the month of "Magh". All beings would pay obeisance to her.

Next, Sri Krishna, himself, paid her honour, Brahma Vishnu, Maheshwar, Ananta, Dharmar and "Muni-sreshtho" followed suit.

Having heard the tale of Saraswati from Sri Narayan, Dcborshi Narod asked him as to what was required for the worship of the goddess. In reply, Sri Narayan explained "O, Dcborshi, you must cleanse your mind and body. Having had a bath, you must put a spring of five leaves of mangoes in water, held in a clay pot. In front of this, a tray of rice, bananas and various other fruits must be placed." In other words, the ceremony was explained in details.

Peace will prevail throughout the world, with the worship of Saraswati it was assured. What is required is tranquility and harmony on earth at this juncture. "Data, Danyata, Dayatvam" — T.S. Elliot ("Four Quartets").

WRITE TO MITA

Marital Conflict

Marriage is a complex relationship that can be viewed from many perspectives — sociological, biological, anthropological, religious, legal and, of course, psychological. Obviously, the legal document of marriage is the clearest reference of marriage, but the relationship that this document is grounded on is more complex and meaningful than what a simple legal license indicates.

The following is a brief discussion of assumptions regarding marriage and why with time marriage so often is disillusioning. Marriage is a relationship that proceeds from a romantic, intensive infatuation stage to a problem solving extensive relationship. One might characterise the early stage of marriage as one in which reality recedes and fantasy dominates. The individual projects his or her own needs onto the loved one in such a way that the person becomes over idealised far beyond whatever qualities in reality are possessed. It is no wonder that the contrast between the early stage and the later state of marriage, after reality looms more significantly, produces major problems.

Now let us look at what happens. In the early stage or honeymoon stage, the partner lives only for giving to the chosen one. The partner demands little but gets everything, and the other partner is at the same vantage point, that is giving all and asking nothing. Under the sway of intense feeling and distorted perceptions, each responds optimally to the other's needs and because of this, does not have to work to gratify his or her own needs. However, with time this divine state of madness changes, as reality becomes predominant over the years and fantasy is replaced with mundane problems such as balancing the family budget or disciplining the children.

A strange phenomenon now unfolds. Spouses who were originally sufficient unto each other are no longer so. As the demands of living intrude, each begins to give less and focus more on self-needs. Because life now becomes more complex with more external responsibilities required of each partner, each expects more of the mate. The dependency fostered by living together increases both expectations and frustrations. It is this dichotomy of giving less and expecting more that seems to be at the heart of the inevitable conflict in marriage.

To make matters worse, each wants one's own needs to be met first before answering to the other's. It is no wonder that so many marriages strain under these pressures often leading to conflicts which tear at the root of the relationship. With more and more of our young people opting to choose their own partners, another fact need to be mentioned also. The very characteristics that are the most appealing initially and which couple together often become sources of major irritation later. For example, the dashing, happy, adventurous

risk-taking male may captivate the more demure, conservative, somewhat inhibited female. However, once the couple is into family living, fun, pranks, adventures and risk-taking may now disgust the female because they interfere with the conservative, secure style of life that she feels is necessary for the comfort of the family. The man, on the other hand, was attracted to her for her quiet, demure ways, now finds her boring and uninteresting. With ageing, addition of children, increase in responsibilities and changing needs, couples suddenly conclude that they are horribly mismatched.

The following example illustrates both, the increased expectations after marriage and how the initially appealing qualities later become problems.

T (Therapist): When you married your husband what were some of the things that were most appealing to you?

W (Wife): That he was an independent person and was always in control of things.

T: Then what happened?

W: I feel that he does not share his thoughts with me anymore. He takes decisions without consulting me and does not share things with me as much as he used to. When we were newly married, he spent so much time with me. I just want a closer bond with him.

T: So what you are saying is that you married him because he was independent and was in control. However now you are saying that the very thing makes you feel shut out, because he prefers to solve his problems himself.

W: Moreover, he does not give me the attention he used to, he is not the same person anymore.

T (To the husband): What about you, what is it that you like in your wife?

H (Husband): Well she was so vulnerable and dependent, made me want to look after her.

T: Then what happened?

H: She seems a little boring now, always wanting me to take all the decisions, it can sometimes get very irritating.

The above is a typical example and can happen in any marriage. In a relationship as complex as marriage, needs, goals and expectations are constantly changing. Those who can adjust and grow with the changing needs can prevent marriage from becoming disillusioning. The biggest pitfalls married couples should avoid is the over-confidence most people have that just because they are married, things will work out. In real life it does not happen that way. It needs a lot of conscious effort, understanding and the desire of both to have a relationship that is satisfying and fulfilling.

— Shaheen Anam

Euro-Asian Railroad

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Matthew also notes that the eight commercial attaches he approached in New Delhi also responded positively to the proposal.

Rail transit between Bombay and Moscow will save three weeks from sea-rail shipments via the Red Sea, Mediterranean and Odessa," he quotes Georgi Alexandrov, the Commercial Attache at the Russian Embassy.

He also quotes the Indian Undersecretary for Iran and Afghanistan, Satbir Singh, as saying, "The Euro-Asian Railroad is the dream of our Ministry of External Affairs."

Poland's Commercial Attache, Miroslaw Lewinski, he adds, said "We may be able to compete in the Asian markets with rail shipments from our

sulfur mines".

He goes on to quote Dr Heinz Putz, Economic Counsellor of the German Embassy, as saying "this railroad would greatly accelerate Germany's bilateral trade with India."

Matthew also informs that copies of the proposal have been sent to Premier Li Peng of China, Minister of Trade of Myanmar, David Abel, President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani of Iran, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh and the SAARC Secretary General Ibrahim Zaki in Nepal.

But is he really optimistic about being able to sell the idea? Would the United States be interested in helping in the project?