

Lessons from Mirpur

What are we to make of the outcome of the Mirpur by-election? By all accounts it was a very well conducted election in which peace was maintained throughout the day in all but a few voting centres. The turnout was good. Even the counting process up to the tabulations of 78 centres is reported to have gone smoothly. Then began a series of incidents that has cast a serious doubt on the role of the administration and of ruling party in observing meticulously the rules set down by the Election Commission (EC). It also raises serious questions about irresponsible role of a section of the media whose overzealousness to beat the competition vitiated an otherwise excellent electoral process.

As is evident, a good election was spoilt by a clumsy handling of the result announcing process. We call it a good election because both the leading parties gave extremely good account of themselves. The campaigning was intense but generally peaceful. It was a BNP seat and the ruling party was more or less expected to retain it. But the AL's performance was impressive. Learning from its past mistakes the AL took the campaign seriously and literally did a house to house canvassing. So effective was its campaign that the ruling party felt obliged to cancel a very important state visit of the Prime Minister to France. But an effective campaign does not necessarily have to produce a winner. AL has given a good fight, which is reward enough in a democratic process.

With the election behind us, and with the various complaints of the opposition Awami League before the Election Commission, we don't think there is any reason for AL to call for a half day city hartal today and a full day national hartal on Wednesday, the 10th. The walkout in the Sangsad was a protest. If that is not enough, then they can organise a big demonstration or hold huge public meetings or reveal to the public, through the media, all the evidence at their command about the election irregularities. Work stoppage is an act against our nation's struggle to break of the poverty clutch. We must find out less destructive ways for registering our protests. Maybe the AL can lead the nation in this regard. But whatever it does, it must desist from calling for frequent hartals.

Tourism Lacks Initiatives

Even the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation (BPC) is not likely to contradict the view that tourism in the country has been largely ignored. Apart from occasional ritualistic celebrations, little practical steps are taken to attract foreign tourists and the promotion of domestic tourism remains almost an unheard-of subject. But people with the rudimentary knowledge will agree that the country has enough potential to develop the sector as a big foreign exchange earner. What is needed is a serious effort to build the necessary infrastructure for the purpose.

Inder Sharma, president of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), now on a four-day visit to Bangladesh, has been categorical in his remark that Bangladesh is endowed with a vast scenic beauty laced with rivers and endless stretches of sea beach - essential for attracting tourists. He has put forward specific suggestion that Bangladesh develop beach tourism in line with Thailand and Indonesia. He has, moreover, expressed PATA's readiness to extend co-operation and help to Bangladesh in the area. PATA with its extended facilities and long experiences in the field can really show the way to success for the country's tourism. The fact that the PATA president has referred to the experiences of Thailand and Indonesia is an indication that he means business.

Tourism now recognised as an industry, however, will not stand much of a chance here if the whole system is not seen as a well-knit component. Guide tours, individual travel and group tours can be arranged if both the private and public travel companies are innovative and competitive. So long as the BPC has had little compulsion to seriously look for the various avenues to turn tourism into a profitable economic venture. Private initiatives in this sector are also few and far between. One of the impediments in the way of making this sector economically viable is certainly the poor condition of our communication system. But this is a lame excuse. There are instances of success stories in the private sector communication.

What has to be admitted is the lack of entrepreneurship in the area. Apart from the world's longest sea resort in Cox's Bazar, we boast a unique sea beach at Kua Kata, Patuakhal. If public sector initiative is not forthcoming, even private initiatives could turn the spot into a really popular destination for foreign tourists. Eulogy notwithstanding, this sea beach has not been developed in the least. It is a question of what we want to do, we cannot do. A tourism network, even in a limited way, can prove that people in the West are really interested in our country. It is we who are at fault by not creating a suitable environment for hosting them.

The spirit of Sarajevo is captured perfectly in a poster at the Bosnia-Herzegovina Information Centre in London. It reads: "If a bullet gets me tonight I won't die of death - but love, Sarajevo, a city worth dying for."

Of the four people who work at the centre, two, including Azemina Abdurrahmanovic, recently left Sarajevo. Their parents remain in the besieged city. With little contact, their worries are endless.

"None of them wants to leave," says Abdurrahmanovic. "It is their priority to keep going and see the city free again."

Sarajevo is a city that has made a name for itself on the world map more than once this century. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was assassinated there, sparking the beginning of World War One. The dismantling of Yugoslavia has now brought war back to Europe and generated its biggest refugee crisis since World War Two.

Bosnia-Herzegovina was not always riddled with conflict. On the contrary, ethnic cooperation has been its hallmark. Bosnian culture showed remarkable resilience as great empires clashed. Religions - Jewish, Christian and Muslim - intermarried, Catholic and Orthodox faiths intersected and Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires overlapped.

Each empire has left a mark on the culture and architecture of Bosnia. "You can feel it in the people - they are a bit different from others in Europe and a bit of something Eastern," says Abdurrahmanovic. "It is a unique mixture."

Sarajevo is situated along the Miljacka River, in a valley flanked by two mountains, Crepoljsko to the north and Trebevic to the south. In the city, which had a population of 535,000 before the war, architecture is distinct according to historical influences.

The east end of city is called the Bascarsija or historic Muslim quarter, where Ottoman influence is obvious. Mosques and Byzantine buildings are more common, as are narrow cobble-stone streets and open markets.

To the west of Bascarsija lies the Sweet Corner or Slatko Cose, where Austro-Hungarian architecture meets Ottoman architecture. Catholic and Gothic buildings are common.

Sanda Kolar, of the Bosnia Project Refugee Council in London, originally from Sarajevo, says the two areas are very distinct. Yet they are very common place for Sarajevians. "Within five minutes walking distance of Slatko Cose, there is a Catholic Cathedral, Orthodox Cathedral, the Great Mosque and the Jewish Synagogue," says Kolar.

According to the Yugoslav custom of naming streets after distinguished historical figures, Titova or Marshal Tito Street stretches the extent of the city centre. In appropriate fashion, Yugoslav People's Army Street runs closely parallel. Kolar says that there is little in the way of monuments to Archduke Ferdinand - "just a couple of footprints on the pavement near the river, and a plaque." She says children are taught to view the assassins, Gavrilo Princip, as a hero who kept the Austro-Hungarian Empire at bay. His legacy has earned him more rewarding monuments: the Principl bridge and the Gavrilo Princip Museum.

The history of the Bosnian people dates back to the 7th Century when Slavic tribes moved into the area now recognised as Bosnia. Three centuries later and through the Middle Ages, the East met

Sarajevo—a City Worth Dying for

by Andrea Khan

For ten months the city of Sarajevo has been under virtual siege. The agony grows. Medical supplies low. Operations often carried out without anaesthetic. Little heating. No power to cook. It is another chapter in a long history of a famous city. Sarajevo has been the backyard for the clashing of great Mediterranean empires: Catholicism and the Orthodoxy and the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Gemini News Service profiles one of Europe's most history cities.

West as Orthodox and Catholic religions intertwined in Bosnia. At the end of the Middle Ages, from 1463 to 1787, Bosnia was conquered by the Ottoman Empire. This era saw the transformation of Bosnian society. A new spiritual and cultural framework was created, forming the basis of contemporary Bosnian society. Sephardi Jews, banished from Portugal and Spain, moved into the area.

The present site of Sarajevo was not settled until the late 1400s, because with hills surrounding it, bombardment and capture was easy. The irony of the present-day situation does not escape Marian Wenzel, a historian committed to salvaging Bosnian heritage. She says "Sarajevians are now suffering from what everyone was afraid would happen 500 years ago."

It was not until 1878, when Bosnia passed over to Austro-Hungarian rule, that European influences changed Bosnia. The period was halted by World War One after the assassination in Sarajevo of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne.

The life of Yugoslavia was brief. It came into existence after the war in 1921 and began to unravel 60 years later, shortly after the death of Tito, who had managed to unite the ethnically diverse republics.

William Tribe, teacher of English at Sarajevo University, says: "The end of the communist era saw the growth of nationalism which has now resulted in some of the ethical confrontation. There was this

Doors are being torn from their hinges and virtually no trees are left standing. The forests surrounding the city are off limits, because they are held by opponents. Walking out of the door is a little like playing Russian roulette. Hope is still found in Sarajevo where people combat the fighting by refusing to give into ethnic lines. People of all backgrounds work together, sharing their stoves and cooking together.

The way the people celebrated New Year's Eve showed, says Tribe, the "dogged determination in Sarajevo not to let situation get you down."

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Our Geo-Economic Position: The Dragon Connection

by Avik Sanwar Rahman

Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolution have created the surface of the earth. This famous conclusive remark on India by Karl Marx has its significance, even now, within the national economy of any nation. In fact, Marx holds that, so long as this universality of the market has not reached its ultimate geographical limit, capitalism has not yet reached its apex. Only when this process reached its culmination with the opening of Japan and China to Western trade, then only could the internal process of decomposition and change be expected to start.

The geographical positions have had played an important role throughout the world history. The significance of the location was started with the control of the river-water and, later, of the trade-route. The rise and fall of any ruler or of any kingdom was based on 'who controlled the trade-route?' Many of the greatest wars had been fought over this issue. The 1956 'Suez Canal War' between Egypt and Great Britain aptly suggests point as a recent past instance. Some authorities even think that the 'Crusade' was patronized by the

'merchants of Venice' who had long dreamed of dealing 'Byzantium' a blow for supremacy in the Mediterranean trade. And, a new sea-route to India had become a dire necessity for the Europeans, when Turks controlled the land-route.

The great English poet Milton speaks in 'Paradise Lost' of 'the wealth of Ormus and of Ind'; indeed, the wealth of India was proverbial in times long past. It was tales of gold and silver, diamonds and rubies, silks and brocades, musk and camphor, and above all spices and muslin, that fired the imagination of distant peoples and made them covet the riches of India. While Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was famous for spices the traders had to come to Bengal for its muslin. Trade and commerce developed in Bengal well before the 'birth of Christ'.

Trade and its geographical position made Bengal a meeting place of East-West trade. According to Cary and Warmington, Tamralipti (a port in East Bengal) was one of the few places where Greek and Chinese traders and seamen met as early as the first century. The outward move of Bengal civilization is traced in the ancient Chinese literature. There it was stated that 'Annam' in 'Champa' came un-

der the rule of 'Bongolung' about 700 BC. The Mauryan Empire (4th-2nd century B C) had its base in the Bihar-Bengal region with its provincial capital at Pundranagara (Mahasthan). The Mauryan, the Gupta, and the Pal, at least 1300 years of Buddhist rule made Bengal the forerunner of South-East Asian civilization.

A long time had passed since the end of the Buddhist rule in Bengal. Now, we're an independent nation known to the world as Bangladesh. But, unfortunately we're still identified with the 'Indian Subcontinent'. Naturally, our people recognize India as our 'next-door neighbour'. We expect everything must come from the West. It was not till the 'Rohingya' refugees made us aware of our another 'next-door neighbour' in the East - Myanmar (Burma).

Let's take a view of our position in the world-map. In the east of Bangladesh there is Myanmar; in the north-east of Myanmar there are China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South and North Korea, and Japan; in the south-east of Myanmar there are Thailand, Laos, Vietnam; and in the far-south-east there are Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines.

The major natural asset of Bangladesh is its access to the open ocean, the value of which is so readily apparent when one considers the logistical and geo-political problems of land locked countries, such as Afghanistan, Nepal, and Laos. Through the 'Bay of Bengal', there is easy access to the 'Indian Ocean' and the major lanes of international shipping. This is of paramount importance to a country which is, and will remain, dependent on trading for the maintenance of an adequate standard of living. But this is not 'all in all'. A country also needs a land-rout for its trade. For that reason, to connect the land-route with the Far-Eastern countries Myanmar appears to be a logical choice.

Our policy-makers must take this fact into serious consideration, because we can also boost our economy by trade and commerce as it is in the case of Singapore. Though the people of Myanmar are striving for democracy against the autocratic military rule, there is still one thing to hope. The historic 'bridge on the river Kawi', that had been destroyed by the allied bombing in the WW-II, has been rebuilt recently to connect the land-route between Rangoon and

Bangkok. It is an indication of pouring 'water into the wine'.

Meanwhile, the world is already breaking up into regional trade blocs. The regional groupings like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Arrangement), EC (European Community), and AFTA (ASEAN Free Trade Area) are by definition protectionist blocs, as they are all striving for a common market. Tough there are fears of contradiction, there are also hopes of growing markets and 'consumptionism'. The ASEAN planned to increase its membership from 6 to 10 which includes Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. And, when Myanmar is our 'next-door neighbour' we could also welcome this change. While ASEAN is becoming overwhelmingly an 'economic bloc', unfortunately, or SAARC re-

maintains a 'cultural bloc'. Apparently it appears, as long as SAARC is not going to play the vital role of trade and commerce, we've to look beyond the SAARC. Besides, there are other countries, in the north-east Asia, like China, Taiwan, the two Koreas, and Japan which have no 'trade bloc'. Recently, Chinese Communist Party formally supported the 'economic reform plan' of Deng Xiaoping and consequently turned to the 'market economy'. Again, the visit of the Japanese Emperor to China indicates that there could be another regional connection in the north-east.

However, this is for the first time, since the Industrial Revolution, the world has turned its eyes to the East. The national wealth of the Asian countries are being counted in the 'world economy'. But, unfortunately, Bangladesh has no role to play in this sphere. It is our disgrace that being a geographically favourable country (regionally and naturally) we're nothing to give to the world.

Let's 'give and take', let's trade. Our geo-economic position shows that we could play a vital role for the 'east-west connection'. Let's be a part of the land that time forgot - the land where 'Dragons' still survive - the 'Dragon Connection'.

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.

Award for freelancers

Sir, Your editorial plea (Star, Jan 26) for awards for our limited freelancers is considerate and broad-minded, notwithstanding the pettifying of our politicians.

In the developing countries, the editors are flooded with all kinds of contributions - intimations of the divine discontent in man - mostly profane, and some sublime, for two reasons: limited outlets, and limited purchasing power. The outputs are also severely limited, matching with the lack of opportunity, training and experience.

What is not readily realised by the lay mind is that a fertile imagination is no substitute for the craft of writing; nor enthusiasm a sign of genius. The ordinary lead pencil is sharpened repeatedly at one end, while the editor's blue pencil is blunted at the other end. The patience of the editorial staff in dealing compassionately with raw genius is admirable, worth emulating at national level.

I understand the expenses for repatriation are being borne by Rabita Al Islam. By initiating a negotiation with Government of Bangladesh, Rabita may succeed to send back the refugees at a lesser cost which will bring income to Bangladesh Biman at the same time helping the stranded Pakistanis to go back home.

Use of natural gas in the transportation sector

Sir, The new US Energy Secretary is using a car run by natural gas. What is wrong with our Ministers? President Clinton is reported to be concentrating on more use of natural gas during the next decade. As for local news, gas supply to Mymensingh has just been inaugurated; but the Titas Gas Supplement in the newspapers make no mention of the use of natural gas in the road transport sector, especially by the heavy vehicles such as buses and trucks.

We have been reading and hearing about this project for so many years, but nothing concrete has been announced or is being done. The use of gas in vehicles is a long-term project, involving the creation of proper infrastructure at various horizontal and vertical levels. The paper planning and exercises are long and complex, involving foreign technical collaboration and financial tie-ups.

Plight of a housewife

Sir, Since last October we have been suffering from gas problem. Now-a-days has become almost unbearable. The supply goes off in the morning around 7.30 or 8.00 and resumes as late as 2.30 or 2.45pm. It is winter and I have two little kids and office goes very much troublesome for me to cope with everything in minutes. Should the authorities take note of it and do their bit at the earliest?

Repayment of bank loans

Sir, The liquidity position of a bank largely depends upon the recovery position of its loan. In order to quicken the recovery of locked up money the present government published a long list of defaulters and urged upon them to repay the loans. At one stage the government pressed upon the bankers to go for money suit cases where the chance of repayment is bleak. The ministry also collected list of big borrowers to monitor recovery position. The different chambers of commerce, industry and trade requested the government to exempt certain

Bankers will be inspired to give new loans when they are satisfied that the legislative arrangement will make their fund to return smoothly. The bank money is depositors' money and bankers are the custodians of the depositors. It is the duty of the bankers to safeguard the deposited money of the general public.

Mahabubul Haque Chowdhury, Kalabagan, Dhaka.