

Of a Megacity and Rising Waters

The United Nation's 'State of the World Population' report, published on Tuesday has more than one aspect touching upon the interests of Bangladesh. First, it forecast that by the turn of the century, 2000 AD to be precise, Dhaka would become one of the 20 megacities of the world. At place 17, it would then boast of — or weep over, if you will — a population of 1.22 crore. What is not readily appreciated is that this hardly happy news means that in a matter of only seven years we will hit that figure. What is the present population of Dhaka? Time magazine recently put it at 80 lakh. So, we will have an additional 32 lakh people with us in the city by the time it takes an undergraduate to pass out from the Dhaka University. And 32 lakh is more than most historically important cities of the world ever had as their population. Calcutta became a great city of the world when its population touched a million. The additional 32 lakh would mean we shall have in seven years' time another great city's whole population in Dhaka, but, surely enough, without having another city's material wherewithal. In fact, it can be an interesting topic of study as to what size of a population can Dhaka's present material strength — housing and power, roads and transport, water and sewerage — can ideally sustain. The whole of its present capacity may not be sufficient to provide for even 32 lakh residents let alone accommodate a one-crore-plus population.

Neither the municipal budget nor even the national budget of the current year betray any awareness of the impending peril, not to speak of any plans to take up the challenge or making any kind of preparations, or moving effectively to inhibit the endless journey of the rural populace to the town.

There is a kind of foolishness in worrying over only 2000 AD and a 12-million-and-above city population. Neither time nor population would stand still at those points. What will happen in twenty years from now? What, if not the ghost of Malthus would then stop Dhaka hitting two-core-and-more, the figure Mexico city will attain by 2000 AD. The point is to change the process and pattern of population growth and of migration to cities, something our leaders are failing to appreciate even at this late hour.

The UN report has this year as its first concern the question of large scale international migration. Of the many aspects of such migration it has dealt with, the most horrible for any Bangladesh citizen with any feeling for the fellow men and women would be the fact that as a consequence of global warming parts of Bangladesh would go under water forcing 10 per cent of the population — 12 million that is — to migrate abroad. Where will such a huge population migrate, and how? This prospect would only harden the immigration barriers put up by countries unaffected by the rising waters.

The 12 million wouldn't get a Noah's Ark to board in a jiffy. Before they land on foreign perches what will be the shape of our economy, and what of our society? So far we haven't heard the voice of anyone who is concerned over these dangers threatening all our tomorrows, starting from any moment now. Migration, whether to the capital city or to foreign lands, is a human tragedy of the first order. It does not take place before one is completely defeated as it so poignantly happened in the case of Harihar, who migrated with Apu and Sarbjaya to a maze of uncertainty called Benares in Pather Panchali.

We the constituents of a new-emerging nation-state do not want to court defeat so early on the day. We want our government and other leaderships to please care.

Full Speed to Rural Electrification

In reply to a question by opposition MP in the Parliament on Thursday, Energy Minister Dr Khandakar Mosharrar Hossain informed the House that all villages would be supplied with electricity by the year 2005. He further informed that 321 thanas out of a total of 460, have already been brought under the rural electrification programme.

This is indeed a welcome news. Nothing is likely to change the life of rural Bangladesh as electrification would. If there is one priority target that government should try to fulfill, it is the target of rural electrification. The immediate impact would be new job creation. Thousands of small and cottage industries are likely to go up in our rural areas the moment electricity is made available there. This will result in all sorts of new technologies and ideas penetrating into our aged rural society.

However, for the type of growth of rural industry that availability of electricity is capable of generating, we must also make available rural credit so that people in our villages, with some amount of capital, can borrow additional amount, and get started some small scale industries. So the approach of making energy and credit available to our villagers, must go hand in hand. These two ingredients of production can work wonders, only if done in a coordinated fashion.

Here the experience of areas already receiving electricity should be examined. Initial findings show that the growth of cottage and small scale industries in rural areas already receiving electricity have not been upto expectation so far. Our view is that it is due to the absence of easily accessible credit, that rural industrialisation has lagged behind. We urge the relevant ministries to carefully examine this question.

Another ministry that should push for early electrification of all villages, is education. With electrification, rural schools should be supplied with television which, then, can be used to impart the latest in knowledge about every subject. Practical classes and experiments in agriculture are also likely to get a big boost through educational programmes on the TV.

The Rural Electrification Board, the body responsible for all this work, deserves our commendation for the job they have so far carried out and full support for their future programmes.

"What We Need is a United Front against Communalism"

by Mahfuz Anam

A comparatively young age M J Akbar became a renowned journalist and built him enviable reputation first as the editor of the Calcutta-based weekly Sunday, and later as the first editor of the Telegraph, also published from Calcutta.

After the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, Mr Akbar joined politics and was elected the Lok Sabha on Congress (I) ticket. A close confidant of Rajiv Gandhi in late eighties, Akbar suffered electoral defeat in 1989, but was elected back to the parliament in 1991 from Bihar.

Author of several books on Indian politics, and a well thought of biography of Nehru, Akbar now professes to the resolution with politics and plans to return full time to journalism. He now writes a weekly column in the Telegraph of Calcutta, and in finishing his book on Kashmir.

DS: The Daily Star (DS): Did you expect what is happening now in India? The rise of BJP, the insecurity of the Muslims, and the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism. Did you expect all this?

MJA: I don't know about expectation, but there was a kind of inevitability to it. You can't understand today without seeing the kind of politics that we've had over the last forty years. In a very critical way the Congress has been responsible. I think the Congress never recovered psychologically and intellectually from the defeat it suffered in 1947 — the partition. So it took the easy way out. It imitated the politics of the Muslim League in dealing with the Muslims who were left behind in India during the fifties and the sixties.

DS: What do you mean by Congress following the politics of the Muslim League?

MJA: The Congress became convinced that in the end the Muslim masses would only listen to the mullahs, and not to the community leaders. Therefore, the politics of the Congress over the last four decades, was based on establishing relations not with the Muslim masses, but only with the Muslim mullahs.

DS: Please elaborate this point.

MJA: In 1947, the migration that took place was not a migration of the people, but of the elite. This is especially true for Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. It was the Muslim elites, and the middle-class who went to Pakistan. It was the elites who had created the Muslim League. I don't believe that the Muslim League was ever a mass movement. It won a victory in 1947 but it could not sustain it. Why did Congress last here for 40 years and why did the Muslim League collapse within a few years after partition?

The Bengali language movement in Bangladesh was the end of Muslim League. Muslim League politics was based on creating a power structure among the Muslim elites. The British were also very happy with it. They believed that the leaders of the community were the community — peaks were the mountain, so to speak. This belief was inherited by the Congress. And who were the peaks in Muslim society — elites were gone, to a large extent the middle-class had gone, the bureaucrats, the professionals, the academics, the high government officials, teachers and what have you — had all gone to Pakistan. So who were we left in India? Maulavis and mullahs. And hence the creation of what I call the maulavi politics of India; the madrasa politics.

DS: How has this 'madrasa politics', as you call it, affected the Muslim politics in India?

MJA: It has perverted our goals. What were branded as Muslim priorities, were not the things the Muslim masses needed.

When the BJP charges Congress with appeasing Muslims, it is of course telling a lie, but not a complete lie. The Congress has never appeased Muslims in India, it has only appeased the mullahs. Each time there was a question of giving a share to the Muslims in social upliftment, it would be carried out by doing what the mullahs would want, and not by doing something for the Muslim masses. Even now that is being done. When they (Congress) want a vote in one by-election in Kerala, they announce Friday as a holiday in Muslim majority areas. How does it contribute to the economic or social well-being of the Muslims?

For argument's sake, let us assume that Congress genuinely believed that Muslims should get Friday as their weekly holiday. I am a Muslim and I know how important Friday prayers are for me. But then the question is, why should the Congress take such a step just before an election? Such a decision then becomes vitiated, becomes questionable. It helps nobody, and becomes a sellout to the mullah forces and constitutes 'appeasement'. From 1952 onwards this became the Congress policy towards Muslims. Their only aim was to get the Muslim votes.

DS: Can you give some example from 1952 onwards, of Congress appeasing the mullahs?

MJA: Just before the elections Congress would always parade the mullahs around. The madrasa teachers, who were really the managers of the vote banks, were wooed by Congress, not the Muslims voters.

DS: No attempt was made to establish contact with masses?

MJA: Not at all. Because es-

ablishing contact with the masses would mean solving their problems, doing something real.

DS: What are the real problems of the Muslim masses?

MJA: Security, jobs, education, economic opportunity. These are problems of all poor people, and nobody is poorer in India than the Indian Muslims. Poverty, backwardness and the like are their problems. No attempt was ever made to solve these problems. The illiteracy rates of Indian Muslims are substantially higher than those of the general average. But since the ruling classes and the regimes never addressed these problems, and still needed and wanted their votes, they would take the shortcuts — go to the religious leaders, appease them, and then get them to seek votes for you.

DS: How do you explain the rather sudden rise of BJP in Indian politics?

MJA: BJP did not rise in India for a long time, why? Because the perception of Muslims as the 'enemy' did not find support among the common man. But the BJP in the 80s, using a multitude of fac-

tors, very cleverly brought the image of the 'Muslim' as the enemy into the mainstream of Hindu middle-class consciousness. Not only using the Hindu-Muslim question or mosque and temple, but using Pakistan, using Pakistan's support in Punjab, they managed to build up the sentiment that all Muslims were suspect. Thus, a pent up hatred was brought out. This was later symbolised by the Babri mosque, whose demolition became their demand.

For me personally the presence or the absence of a mosque is not the issue. Islam survived in India long before the Babri masjid was built, and it will survive long long after it has been destroyed. Islam is not a faith of weaklings. And similarly, the construction of a temple will not suddenly make everybody Hindu. What was the importance of Babri masjid? What were the reasons it should not have been destroyed? Because it was made into a symbol, it was made into a symbol by liberal and secular India. The secularists said that this was the watershed. This was the symbol of whether India was to be secular or communal. This is where they would take a stand, and there would be no compromise.

DS: And the secularists failed.

MJA: Totally. Now it is a complete mess. Nobody knows

what is going to happen next. And, as usual, whenever there is confusion, there is depression. What do you do then? Any psychologist will tell you that you do when you are both confused and depressed. You contemplate suicide. And what is suicide in a large social level? It is the incitement and temptation to violence.

DS: What are the Indian Muslims doing now?

MJA: Unfortunately, the Indian Muslims have become a plaything of everybody. They were killed. But did we have a Pakistan for the Muslims of UP and Bihar? They were killed in riots before '47, and they are being killed now.

The final irony was that after the partition, when the vulnerable Muslims — from UP and Bihar — actually went to Pakistan, they couldn't find any place for themselves. They were treated like pariahs, as outsiders. They still are. There are the Biharis in Bangladesh and Muhajirs in Pakistan. Imagine being called 'Muhajirs' — refugees, 46 years after the creation of the

country for Muslims of India. How do you think Muslims of UP and Bihar feel?

DS: So there is a deep guilt about Indian Muslims in the minds of the people of Pakistan and Bangladesh. How does it affect contemporary situation?

MJA: What you do with a deep guilt, you get passionate, you get prejudiced, you get hysterical, you get irrational — because you have no answers to the problems at hand. The only answer you give is the answer that Gen Ziaul Huq gave when I asked him. He said Pakistan was created to protect Islam in the subcontinent, not the Muslims. It is a very interesting difference — meaning that we are not concerned about the condition — social and economic — of the people. Religion becomes a political tool in such a case. At this point I asked him 'Since when did Islam become so weak that it needed the protection of a

parties of India — whether Congress, or Janata Dal. They are a plaything of the BJP, who are its enemies. And worse, they have become the plaything even of their neighbours — Pakistan, and to some extent, also of Bangladesh. In my view Pakistan is the biggest exploiter of the Indian Muslims.

DS: Please elaborate on this point.

MJA: Pakistan has done nothing, absolutely nothing for the Indian Muslims.

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MJA: I say that because the Muslims of Pakistan suffer from guilt. They created a country in the name of the Muslims. Their argument was that if we do not divide, then there is no security for the Muslims. The Muslims would be finished in India. Now what does that mean? Think about it. The argument of security was the most important. So

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MJA: Pakistan has done nothing, absolutely nothing for the Indian Muslims.

DS: Why do you say that?

MJA: I say that because the Muslims of Pakistan suffer from guilt. They created a country in the name of the Muslims. Their argument was that if we do not divide, then there is no security for the Muslims. The Muslims would be finished in India. Now what does that mean? Think about it. The argument of security was the most important. So

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