

SAARC Meet

There are two ways of evaluating the outcome of the just concluded 13th meeting of SAARC Council of Ministers. One is to view it as part of an on-going process of evolution of our regional body; the other is to look at the specific achievements of this particular meeting. In the former sense, the Dhaka meeting can be given high marks. It was held in the most cordial of atmospheres and went on as smoothly as such meetings can be expected to. The cordiality and smooth conclusion become major achievements if we consider the overall circumstances under which the meeting was held. The relations between Bangladesh and India is under strain, to say the least, due to the Ganges water issue. Begum Zia's recent raising of it at the UN, could not have eased the relation any. The relations between India and Pakistan verges on open conflict on the question of Kashmir. The increasing violence and the rising blood-letting has put the Indo-Pak relations to severe test. The question of ethnic Nepalese crowding into Bhutanese territory, threatening the social balance of the peaceful Himalayan Kingdom has greatly soured the otherwise peaceful relations between these two neighbours. The tension between Sri Lanka and India, though at a lower plane than during the days of Premadasa, is far from being cordial.

To bring together these countries, and hold a foreign-minister level meeting smoothly, is really no mean achievement. On a more positive vein, the meeting did grease many of the rusty joints, and smoothened sharp-edged corners, to further roll forward the SAARC machine. The various technical groups and committees worked better, and some sort of work-plan acquired a more discernable shape as a result of this meeting.

The concrete outcome of some significance is the decision to hold a SAARC Finance and Planning ministers' meeting, before the Foreign Ministers meet again next July. SAARC, as we all know, will stand or fall on trade and development issues. This is not unique to SAARC. All regional bodies are based on commercial links between its members. So is the case with SAARC. Such links are likely to get a major push from the proposed meeting of Finance and Planning ministers. As we all know, much of the success of such a meeting depends on the groundwork done by the experts and responsible officials. So the preparatory work is of utmost importance. We would like to reiterate here that for SAARC to take-off, trade relations must be strengthened, the key to which is lowering tariff barriers. While lowering of bilateral tariff barriers may run foul of GATT regulations, a regional arrangement under SAPTA would be welcome. For SAPTA to take-off, both India and Pakistan, whose economies are comparatively stronger than that of the rest of us, will have to take a longer term view of things than they appear to do so now. Here again, the Dhaka meeting appears to have broken some new ground, in having persuaded Pakistan not only to overcome its reservation, but in fact, to make them agree, to host the next round of SAPTA negotiations.

Compared to where we were in regional cooperation, our progress is satisfactory. But compared to where we need to be, our position is nowhere near a reasonable level. SAARC countries have a huge population grinding in utter poverty. Levels in mass literacy, primary education, public health, nutrition, infant mortality etc are shameful to say the least. We are far from the type of massive action and urgent initiatives that our immense problems should prompt us into taking. We must confess that we are still not impressed by the progress SAARC is making. Cordiality is welcome, but it is far from being sufficient to solve our problems.

A Pleasant Surprise

It was a pleasant little surprise with big and welcome implications. The government, said Monday's morning press, has requested all concerned to write the word *Shradhanjali* with correct spelling in wreaths, posters, banners and festoons on different important days and programmes. Obviously someone important in the government hierarchy, one quite logically feels it to be Professor Jahanara Begum, has been pained by that atrocious spelling spoiling every serene occasion of sombre remembrance at the Shaheed Minar or the Nazrul mazar — so much so as to be forced to take executive action. A lot of things could be healed if other ministers and administration toppers would react to people taking liberty publicly with things within their respective province. The environment minister or the secretary to his department could stop a black-spewing bus or a pedlar of migratory birds.

The action is full of food for thought. Rape of our language — and in public — is so common that it doesn't disturb even the most fastidious among us. People who have always spelt *Gitanjali* elongating the end-vowel would naturally do the same with *Shradhanjali*. If government has chosen not to be taken for some illiterate moron, let the government decide to be itself strictly correct in whatever it puts out for public view. Most of the bloomers occurring on government signs and notices would make the miss-spelt *Shradhanjali* look heavenly.

A democratic government is obliged to the people to act in the best interest and tradition of the people's arts and language and culture. It is in an ideal position to set example in a situation of near anarchy in matters linguistic and cultural. During the whole of the Pakistani neocolonial times, Dhaka used to pride itself in its steadily growing use of Bengali in public life — specially on the numberplates of vehicles and the shopfront signs. Very many unpleasant and incongruous socio-cultural as well as political developments have come to snap this nation from the moorings it had so painfully come to value. The worst harm that has come to affect this nation in the post-liberation years is the loss of love and sense of deep attachment to the Bangla language and much has been done to compromise the question of Bangla culture. Mis-spelt *Shradhanjali* is one wee little symptom of a massive cultural rot set in process by inept and directionless politics and being practised and promoted in all of our educational establishments.

Indifference to public misuse of language must be fought at the level where it originates from. Ways have to be found to set right bad education and an awfully uncultured cultural situation. We again record our appreciation of the *Shradhanjali* action.

**M**AHBUB Talukdar's Five Years at Bangabhaban (Banga Bhabane Panch Bachchar) is one of the few books I have read with unflagging interest in recent months. The author joined the Bangabhaban staff as a Special Officer to the President. As far as I can see, though the designation sounded new, the job was that of the Public Relations Officer. In his capacity as special officer, he was rather close to President Abu Sayeed Chaudhury, less so with President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and perhaps, least so to President Mohammadullah. The order is not strictly chronological, as the last named was the second in order of succession. My order follows the curve of the author's level of contact with his successive bosses.

The book commands our attention for one reason chiefly: this may be the one and only book so far authored by someone who had worked for the first three Presidents of Bangladesh, who had lived within the hallowed bounds of the Presidential Palace, and who was privileged to observe from close quarters the goings on of that Palace, involving the highest dignitaries of the state. Mr Talukdar's stay at Bangabhaban was not uniformly smooth or comfortable. Periods of euphoria were succeeded by periods of strain, when his very bonafide was questioned by regular bureaucrats. But despite all this, he managed to survive, though this survival, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, became something empty of meaning. The book could have become one of highest political significance, had the author been himself politically inclined. But clearly enough, he was not. He belonged to the teaching profession, and, by inclinations, he was, and is, a writer. Dr Muhammad Enamul Haq, his

An Insider's Story of Bangabhaban

mentor, had recommended him for appointment to President Abu Sayeed Chaudhury, when he was looking for an aide, to assist him with public relations, and more especially as a speech-writer. Dr Haq's suggestion was readily accepted, and the appointment proved to be thoroughly satisfactory from both sides. The President was what a President should be: high-minded, generous, warm hearted, hospitable, cultured, sophisticated, in fact, approximating Aristotle's ideal of a magnificent man. It was a pleasure to work for him and feel that the services rendered got the fullest appreciation of the man served.

From the authors point of view, the two years (12 January, 1972 to 24 December 1973) that he served President Chaudhury, were the most rewarding of the five years he was at Bangabhaban. Because of the personal qualities of the President, the place was turned into a highly civilised one. Mutual respect and regard between the President and the all-powerful Prime-Minister kept the place free from tension. But — and here we are indebted to Mahbub Talukdar for telling the truth — there was a tension which the President kept to himself and confided to his trusted Aides — the author. It all stemmed from the fact that the President felt himself 'cribbed caged and confined'. The office of the President was limited and determined that way. The post was ornamental, and President Chaudhury, after all his efforts to organise world opinion in 1971 in favour of our liberation war as the accredited spokesman of the Bangladesh Government in

Exile, suddenly found himself occupying a chair — a most exalted chair at that — without corresponding responsibilities. It was not what is called a sinecure job, but in essence, it amounted to that. Especially for a man with President Chaudhury's pastored of activities, and his years, a life of mere protocol duties and rigid formalities, without any say in political decisions, was hardly a life at all.

The switch-over to a Presidential form of government, and the assumption of office of the President by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was still thirteen months away. For these thirteen months, we had Mr Mohammadullah on the

chair, has not raised the issue. Here he is uncompromisingly correct, and apologetic. He has contented himself by simply describing the changed climate of Bangabhaban with the arrival of a new President. The weightlessness of the President's office became suddenly vivid. It was as if a glow, a glamour, had suddenly disappeared. Mohammadullah's meekness, unobtrusiveness and self-effacement left Bangabhaban a place where high officials suddenly became busy finding way and means to occupy their leisure hours which were limitless. Secretaries took to playing tennis with a new zest, and when they were not playing, they were gossiping to their

the Press wing of the President's Secretariat, his position now became third to judge by his account. But, to compensate, the President took due notice of him, and asked him to continue to stay at Bangabhaban, though he himself never moved in there. And that made all the difference. Bangabhaban was a deserted house, and Ganabhaban, always the centre of power and authority, became more so, gaining by what Bangabhaban lost.

Mahbub Talukdar's narrative does not step with the assassination of the President (and his family) in August, 1975. He has still tales to tell, all centring round the House. The House, Bangabhaban, was destined to see unprecedented sights that followed the assassination. We have a wing side view of the central stage of the fateful days of President Mushtaq, of the Central Jail killings, and finally, of the arrival of Justice Abu Sayeed Mohammad Sayem as the puppet President of General Zia.

All this matter for historians and Mahbub Talukdar is not one. But as witness to certain events, as a painter of some portraits, and as a narrator without much of a commentary to offer, his book offers something which I have not come across elsewhere. He is a first hand account, of a relatively junior officer, of five successive Presidents, four of whom had lived and worked in Bangabhaban. The account is not politically motivated as I have already said, but raises issues of a political nature. Of these issues, is the one relating to the office of the President under a Parliamentary democracy.

Both Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury and Mr Mohammad

dullah, had the fortune or the misfortune of holding the office of the President while Bangabhaban Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the Prime Minister. They must have been quite clear in their minds regarding the scope and limit of the Presidents' power.

There is nothing to suggest that in either case, the Prime Minister had curtailed these powers, or had stepped into a ground reserved for the President. Still, the question which has remained valid till to-day is how much ground has been set apart for them, i.e. for the president. The issue is basically constitutional, and, only partly of practice and convention. For example, it seems to be a practice in comparable political systems that the Prime Minister is expected to brief the President periodically, about matters of major significance. Also, that he is expected to see off and to receive the President as and when the President leaves the country and returns home. Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib appears to have been well-versed in these rules, but with a weak personality in the seat of the President, things seem to go off the track. Bangabhaban is still there, still a symbol of the nation. Whether there is another Mahbub Talukdar there, quietly observing the fluctuating fortunes of the House, and its occupant, is not known to us. Both Bangabhaban and President should shine even though as symbols; their eclipse, deliberate or by default, is the last thing we want to see.

I am sure, Mahbub Talukdar, if he happens to read these notes, will fully agree with me. I congratulate him on an excellent work, full of wit, good sense and tact, and refreshingly free from rancour.

PASSING CLOUDS  
Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

chair left vacant by Justice Abu Sayeed Chaudhury.

The charge was abysmal. A magnificent man was replaced by a modest, quiet and rather colourless person, who had had a record of long service to the party, as Awami League's Office Secretary. By all accounts, Mr Mohammadullah had done a good job in that capacity. But how he, in the eyes of the Sheikh, qualified himself for the highest office of the state, has remained a mystery. Even if the outgoing President had occasionally smarted under the constraints, and had let the Prime Minister realise what he felt, the choice of Mr Mohammadullah as President is to be seen as an expression of a political perception about the office of the President under a Parliamentary form of government.

Our author, Mahbub Talukdar, has not raised the issue. Here he is uncompromisingly correct, and apologetic. He has contented himself by simply describing the changed climate of Bangabhaban with the arrival of a new President. The weightlessness of the President's office became suddenly vivid. It was as if a glow, a glamour, had suddenly disappeared. Mohammadullah's meekness, unobtrusiveness and self-effacement left Bangabhaban a place where high officials suddenly became busy finding way and means to occupy their leisure hours which were limitless. Secretaries took to playing tennis with a new zest, and when they were not playing, they were gossiping to their

hearts' content. No wonder, in the section devoted to Mr Mohammadullah's term of office, Mahbub Talukdar has little to write about state business, and he fills the pages by presenting a number of portraits of M Keramat Ali, the President's Principal Secretary, of professor Sibnarayan Ray, of Leafold S Senghor, the President of Senegal who came on a state visit to Dhaka late in May, 1974, of Abul Hasan, the poet, of Shamim Sikdar, the sculptress, and sister to Siraj Sikdar.

Russians Fear Yeltsin Slide to Dictatorship

Andrew Wilson writes from Moscow

**T**HE stage is set for Russia's first post-communist parliamentary elections. President Boris Yeltsin has said they will open a new era — by which time he will have closed the whole chapter of Soviet history.

In this direction more can be expected from his principal stage manager, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. If Luzhkov does not succeed in removing Lenin from the Red Square mausoleum, he hopes at least to secure the return to Moscow of the ashes of ballerina Anna Pavlova.

No remains are safe from Luzhkov's reburial plans, including those for 400 politicians, writers and astronauts concealed in the Kremlin walls.

Already the bloody events of October 3 and 4 are being recorded in language confirming the supremacy of the star actor. In official pronouncements, parliament's defiance of the President was a "mutiny" led by "traitors counting on armed struggle." The coup attempt of August 1991, on the other hand, was merely a "failed putsch."

The image is that of a president "showing strong executive power" — a formula approved by two out of three Russians, according to a poll in the newspaper *Argument i Fakti*.

Yeltsin has armed himself with strong powers. He is also a tortured personality, suffering fits of depression and vacillation dating from a childhood head injury. His excessive drinking is said to have begun in an attempt to avoid dependence on pain-killers.

Today, he alternates between highs and lows — the highs coinciding with his "strong executive" moments, the lows with long absences when he goes to

Russians are about to elect a parliament and vote on a new constitution. President Boris Yeltsin has said the vote will mark the start of a new era for the country. Critics worry that he is arming himself with too much power and stepping toward dictatorship. Gemini News Service reports on the lead up to the first post-communist parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation.



BORIS YELTSIN  
Democratic dictatorship?

"reflect" in his *dacha*. Lately the absences have tended to increase. Yeltsin, 62, is admitted by close sources to be sick. All that reinforces his need of strong, if not dictatorial, constitutional provisions.

The elections are supposed to produce a democratic parliament where, by definition, opposition is part of the political process. The President's continued identification of parliamentary opposition with obstruction or even treason, is hardly promising.

Recently his deputy chief of staff, Vyacheslav Volkov, announced that a Moscow "candidate club" would educate future deputies so that, "once

elect, they can immediately start constructive work and not get involved in political intrigues like certain of their predecessors."

More to the point is the barring from the vote, by an electoral commission and without explanation, of eight of the 21 political parties that had accumulated the requisite 100,000 signatures by the November 7 registration deadline. Even the reformist *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* spoke of a move to crush the opposition, leaving the President the "power of life and death."

In governing circles, the bloody events of October are now blamed on an excess of freedom — of association and of the press. This will not be allowed to happen again. Although newspaper censorship was dropped after Western protests, and *Pravda* is being published again under a new editor, television — and most papers — give undiluted coverage to Yeltsin's election messages.

Supervising the service is the director of the Federal Information Centre, Mikhail Poltaranin, known as Goebbels to his enemies.

Yeltsin's most effective act has been to keep control of drafting the constitution, which will be put to the voters on the same day as the parliamentary elections, December 12. If approved, it gives him the right:

- 1) to nominate the prime

minister, chiefs of the armed forces and top judges;

- 2) to dismiss the prime minister without parliament's consent; and

- 3) to veto laws passed by parliament, unless a two-thirds majority in both houses overturns the presidential veto.

If the Duma, the 225-seat lower house, rejects more than two presidential nominees for prime minister, the president can dissolve it. In addition, instead of the four years previously announced, the first parliament will serve for only two years. And Yeltsin, instead of standing for his own re-election, as promised, next June, will serve his full term until 1996.

The idea of holding the constitutional referendum alongside parliamentary elections came from Sergei Filatov, Yeltsin's chief of staff. The increasing influence of the president's aides is a trend disturbing even loyal supporters.

For example, Anatoli Sobchak, mayor of Saint Petersburg and a coordinator of the so-called constitutional conference, did all he could to prevent the drafting of the constitution being taken over by the President's apparatus. He was not successful. Protests came from reformist political parties, including the Democratic Party of Russia, whose representatives walked out of a sitting.

In another protest, seemingly overlooked by Western journal-

ists and governments (critical of Yeltsin, Vladimir Shumeiko, a deputy premier, questioned the point of holding a referendum since the only draft was the President's and there was "no chance of any other" emerging, Shumeiko was right. The final draft, published on Nov 10, had been amended in secret at Yeltsin's *dacha*.)

The best hope of avoiding a slide into real dictatorship could lie with splits now appearing in the President's own camp. They are between both himself and some minister, and between ministers and aides.

A decree allowing them to run for parliament has helped heighten their profiles. Some have already distanced themselves from presidential policy.

Others are alienated by what they see as an indirect attack on their standing — for example, Yeltsin's letting (or encouraging) the press to attack the defence, interior and security ministers for ineptness in the October crisis.

Poltaranin, and the latitude Yeltsin allows him, could yet become an overriding political issue. Vice-premier Shumeiko has attacked Poltaranin for wanting an interim state council to control the government in the temporary absence of parliament.

Ministers believe it possible that Yeltsin could be persuaded to keep a "state council" in being after the elections, deliberately downgrading ministerial authority. Such a step would indeed be the onset of dictatorship — something Yeltsin, anxious to retain Western financial and political support, has so far shrunk from embracing.

ANDREW WILSON is editor of the *European Press Agency* based in Brussels.

OPINION  
Premature Taste

A Mawaz

The Bangladesh society is facing a serious crisis today, created by the politicians. The political parties are now finding it difficult to control or redirect it — the activities of the student fronts which have now degenerated into serious campus violence; showing no sign of abeyance even after two years.

The party in power has a major role to play in solving this deep-seated malaise eating into the vitals of the nation, adversely affecting the future rulers of the country.

Today the political nation-building activities (assisting the political parties and the leaders) of these student bodies have boomeranged into ugly monsters seen in the form of campus violence. Is the situation getting out of control? The early warning signals the nation had been getting for the past few years stuck to the conscience of the peace-loving citizens who are helplessly watching the downward trend. The future of higher education in the country is at stake — the loss of time and the tendency to migrate elsewhere for higher studies.

The point to examine is whether the situation has gone beyond the point of no-return. The premature taste of power and influence will inevitably produce undesirable results — in fact, it is doing so right now.

A fruit takes time to ripen. The birth of a baby takes many months. The education of a person takes almost two decades before he enters the world seeking a career, and enjoys the fruits of his labour. One has to wait for a certain period before becoming a parent. A career has to be built up, experience gained, before senior position can be coveted. There is a natural pace in all pursuits of life. Maturity takes its own time, and has its own rewards.

Artificial ripening will produce artificial results. Compensation has to be paid for rewards or desired results. There is a limit to forcing the pace, in any walk of life. The principle

applies to human society globally.

In developing societies in the emerging countries (invariably poor initially), the politicians have been depending heavily on the student bodies, for reasons which are not difficult to understand. Poverty and illiteracy are the two basic causes. The leaders are aware what the limits of exploitation are, beyond which these student bodies start getting spoilt. This damage — irreparable during the formative stage — spills into, and is reflected during the next stage when these students later become eligible as full-grown adults to run the various affairs of the country.

In the developed and industrialized countries the situation changes, due to diversification of job opportunities, stability in politics, and improved conditions in the standard of living. The situation in Bangladesh is not unique — the pattern is similar in most of the DCs and LDCs.

Three questions have to be faced squarely. The first is whether the student fronts of the political parties should be maintained, modified, or disbanded. The second is how the limits are to be set — on the basis of political consensus. The third situation is more formidable: if these fronts were to be disbanded, then how to fill in the vacuum; or redirect the energy of these thousands of "active" students or political workers into constructive channels, remembering the painful truth that they have tasted, prematurely, the heady pleasures of power, influence, and easy money, and are loth to return to the status of ordinary and normal students who peacefully follow the academic career during the period known as student life.

The political leaders owe a heavy responsibility to the society in quickly solving this national crisis — it is no longer a party crisis. Will they rise above party and above politics?

To the Editor...

Congratulation

Sir, Though belated, I congratulate Mr Mahfuz Anam on his taking over the charge of Editor of The Daily Star. We came to know that Mr Mahfuz Anam worked closely with S M Ali for many years. Mr Anam has been in the journalism profession for a long time. He has great contribution to The Daily Star. He knows well what S M Ali's dream was with The Daily Star. Earlier, as the executive editor of this paper, Mr Mahfuz Anam helped and cooperated with the late S M Ali (founder-editor) to make The Daily Star a fine English newspaper by all counts. So the decision to make Mr Mahfuz Anam editor of The Daily Star is so very welcome.

Here I ought to say that we are so happy to have the opportunity of reading a high class English daily like The Daily Star. This paper has been quite able to fulfill the readers' expectations. Within a short time, it has become a popular and credible newspaper for its objective and neutral journalism. It is to be admitted that this has been possible by the honest efforts, sincerity and dedication of the journalists working in this paper. In particular, I have to name late S M Ali who was the dreamer of this paper and played the leading role to make The Daily Star a newspaper of international standard. S M Ali

succeeded to bring in a number of good columnists to write for The Daily Star. The articles they are contributing from time to time are very analytical and increasing our knowledge.

S M Ali has departed for another world. He has not had enough time to finish his remaining task with The Daily Star. A close colleague of Mr S M Ali, Mr Mahfuz Anam, I am sure, will leave no stone unturned to make more The Daily Star a standard newspaper in the days to come. I wish the widest circulation of The Daily Star.

Md Delowar Hossain  
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'Black gold'

Sir, I extend sincere thanks to Mr O H Kabir on his personal initiative to highlight the availability of 'black gold' in Cox's Bazar. Mr Kabir wrote a number of letters in our national dailies and wanted to help voluntarily if any programme was taken by the government to extract the valuable natural resource called black gold. In a recent BTV's quiz programme (1.11.93) the matter was partly discussed and from there we could understand that millions of taka worth 'black gold' can possibly be extracted from our coastal regions. But so far I remember no pragmatic step has

been taken by the concerned authorities.

I think the proper authority should not waste any more time to make a proper study to determine the actual position of this natural gift, the 'black gold', an additional hope for this poor country!

Mottus Samad Choudhury  
Phultola T.E., Sylhet

Crying wolf — any need?

Sir, The results of the recently concluded general election in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan have conclusively demonstrated that in an Islamic polity, howsoever a people can be zealous of maintaining the religious norms and values, the religion has very little to do with politics. The fact that the so-called 'Islamic fundamentalists' have been wiped out from the political landscape of Pakistan bears testimony to this contention. But this should not be surprising to anyone who is well conversant with the true spirit of Islam and the teaching of the Holy Quran and the Hedith.

Even in the socio-cultural settings of the 7th century when the whole mankind was immersed with religious bigotry and barbarism, Prophet Muhammad (SM) vigorously espoused the cause of humanism.

His humane dealings with the Jews and the infidels of Arabia is a pointer to his belief in what is now known as secularism. Secular in its outlook, Islam also teaches us how to adapt to the changing worldly requirements.

So being in the true spirit of Islam, it is not surprising that the Pakistanis have rejected the 'traders of religion'. However, the people who are obsessed with 'fundamentalism' might have been disappointed with the result, because they expected fundamentalist behaviour from the Pakistanis.

The Pakistani election result should serve as an eye-opener to the Bangladeshi enthusiasts of religious fundamentalism on both sides of the fence. They should realize that the vast majority of our people are good Muslims and are, by definition, secular in their outlook and behaviour.

As such, it has been, and would always be, difficult for anybody to exploit the religious sentiments of the people for their political game. This message should sound loud and clear to those who want to use religion as their political bait as well as to those who have a tendency to cry wolf whenever they see anything Islamic on the horizon.

Vox Bangladesh  
Dhaka