

A World-beater Bengali Beauty

She was no front-runner in the tussle. World press was warming up in deliberate and well-planned phases to the Manila pageant organised to select the handsomest of living women — a Miss Universe. Even newspapers in the backyard city of Dhaka were daily printing photographs of the Manila show-in-process, but she wasn't anywhere there. Then suddenly it got around that there was a 'Sen' among the contestants — this year's Miss India.

The Eid holidays intervened and the little interest that some people might have had in the show, waned. But then the Saturday morning finals were seen by many in Dhaka, thanks to the live Doodardshan telecast of the show. Sen has clinched it, they swore to incredulous friends. And Sen it was — Sushmita Sen, a Delhi-based 18-year-old college going Bengali girl from Calcutta.

There was drama in the way the news got us, shall we say clean, bowled. And how happy we were to be so bowled! Beauty contests are not among the best-loved things of a Bengali. And for a Bengali Muslim it is the last thing imaginable for a gentleman to take any interest. And when a Bengali girl — yes a pure-bred Bengali calling her mother *ma* and punctiliously wearing the *tip* and lapping up all the world's sourest concoctions on the sly — hit the incredible world-best spot in something Bengalees were proverbially unendowed with, namely corporeal beauty according to western estimation, something changed within us. We would rather not dismiss it as non-achievement neither would we be anymore a party to the crass denunciation of her feat by the West Bengal CPM organ, Ganoshakti. Decidedly she has earned something on the world scale for the Bengalee people. And however much we underderrate the beauty contests, evidently for involving the female body about which we suffer from a pathological love-hate fixation, we cannot be morons to deny that it takes something to beat all the world's best, in whatever.

Sushmita may or may not work a charm on one merely by her visage and her mien, for beauty, specially the human variety, is a very very subjective attribution made by the observer to the observed. But we are sure of one thing — she must have been the smartest girl in that select crowd of world beauties. For, of late, beauty contests have been seriously counting the personality factor in their evaluation. And it goes to her credit that it was through her better IQ that she came out of a tie at the end of the earlier Miss India contest. And in Manila also, she came up from behind Miss Venezuela, reportedly through sheer intellectual superiority, to clinch the most glamorous show of the world.

And with her rare smartness, we must also concede that here was possibly the world's gutsiest girl. Assuredly our ambivalence to beauty contests would not pass with one Sushmita doing the improbable. It will not be a bad thing to have it with us, after all. But Sushmita has indubitably done Bengalees proud. Congrats to you, Sushmita.

SAPTA's Slow Progress

At the two-day international conference on shaping South Asia's future, held in Kathmandu recently, the Nepalese Prime Minister laid stress on making the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangements (SAPTA) operational. Almost simultaneously, the Indian Commerce Minister, speaking at a conference on South Asian trade held in New Delhi, urged that SAPTA be put in place quickly. SAPTA's progress, however, remains slow.

SAPTA provides a regional legal framework to pursue the goal of liberalising intra-regional trade. The Nepalese Prime Minister maintained that new heights in regional cooperation could be attained by bringing SAPTA into operation.

The Indian Commerce Minister called upon the South Asian nations to bury mutual mistrust and finalise the SAPTA agreement. SAPTA, he said, would boost trade flows in the region, help it forge a common front and increase its bargaining power in international forum and with other regional trade blocs. Business matters should be delinked from political matters, he said.

Suspicion and distrust permeate not just political but trade relations as well in South Asia region. Behind SAPTA also, lurks a fear that more powerful industrial nations in the group would come to dominate trade in the region. Bold gestures from a country such as India, is necessary if SAPTA is to forge ahead.

Signatories to the SAPTA agreement are now exchanging lists of products for tariff concessions. Progress made in this regard remains uneven. Even the attendance at the Inter-Governmental Group (IGG) set up for the purpose of negotiations, is not always regular. Last report indicated that all the member countries had not even submitted their request lists for tariff concessions.

The active interest being taken by the leaders of trade and industry in furthering regional economic cooperation provides a redeeming feature. The trade bodies in the region are exchanging visits and entering into dialogue on ways to expand economic interaction among the countries in South Asia. They have also formed a joint chamber of commerce. SAPTA may draw some strength from these developments.

Leaders of government, particularly those representing more advanced countries in the region, need to show more vision and open-mindedness. They have to be more accommodating in allaying the misgivings of the less advanced members of the forum. Exacting reciprocal advantage from each other should not be the guiding principle for negotiations under the aegis of SAPTA. Industrially more advanced nations should be ready to accord non-reciprocal benefits to other member countries.

The Proposition is: Should the Next General Elections be Held under a Caretaker Government?

Begum Farida Rahman, MP and Vice Chairman, Bangladesh Nationalist Party argues against the proposition. Interviewed by Masud Hasan Khan



The resolution of the demand for a caretaker government, however significant it may be, can be arrived at only through consensus, which can be possible only through discussion. However, the Opposition is now adding conditions to all the initiatives taken by the Treasury bench to resolve the issue through discussion. Is it democratic practice?

Mr Suranjit Sengupta has given a curious formula for holding election under a caretaker government. Can he explain how an elected public representative could hand over power entrusted to him by the people to another un-elected person? Suranjit Sengupta can never transfer his position as a Member of Parliament to anyone as he deems fit. There is no such provision under the Constitution.

As a politician, I have seen many elections under different governments. I would cite some of them as examples as a starter to my arguments.

The election of 1970 was the turning point in the history of our country that paved the way for the birth of independent Bangladesh. The 1970 elections did not take place under any caretaker government. Do you think we should assume that the polls were unacceptable only because they were not held under a caretaker government?

The election of 1973 did not take place under any caretaker government. Can we say that election was also undemocratic? It can be mentioned here that the government which came out of the 1973 polls had introduced the presidential form of government.

The US presidential elections and the recent elections in England — nowhere the question of polling under caretaker government ever arose. So, can we say that democracy was absent in these countries? One after another election is taking place in our neighbouring country India, where democracy is in action for the last 50 years or so. No body has ever raised the issue of polling under a caretaker government in India.

The Opposition's demand for polls under a caretaker government has, actually cropped up from its adamant attitude. They want to violate the constitutional provisions as well as crush all established norms only for their ego-satisfaction.

It is also reflective of the Opposition's isolated nature —

to do something that has never been done in any democracy anywhere. So, I think it is a waste of time and energy to ponder much over the Opposition's demand. Nowhere in any civilised society, polls are held under a caretaker government.

We can only demand introduction of such an undemocratic practice if we consider ourselves politically underdeveloped. I believe BNP is a politically matured organisation.

That is why this backward looking concept cannot get acceptability in my organisation. I also believe the we should try all possible measures to ensure a free and fair election. The election arrangements in other countries can be further studied and the election rules to ensure fairness in our country can be further strengthened. However, where democratic practice is absent, there is little hope for establishing democracy.

Interestingly, no demand of polling under caretaker government came during the last 16 by-elections in which the Opposition bagged the majority votes. There must be a very secret motive behind the Opposition's demand, despite their

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winning of the polls. Our people must know this motive.

Again, the Opposition is demanding that the Treasury bench should move the bill in the parliament providing for election under a caretaker government. That's, indeed, a very weird demand. I do not understand how a bill which belongs to the the Opposition,

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Member of Parliament to anyone as he deems fit. There is no such provision under the Constitution.

We have to remember who for the first time gave the idea for polling under a caretaker government. It was Sheikh Ansar Ali of Jamaat and Rashed Khan Menon of Workers Party who gave the idea during the 12th amendment of the Constitution. Both BNP and Awami League rejected the idea. Later, BNP remained firm in its position while Awami League, changed its mind and went ahead with the issue mooted by Jamaat. I really don't understand what kind of political 'honeymoon' this is.

But still, I say that there is no last word in politics. Awami League and Jamaat are now in each other's embrace. We cannot say that similar kind of thing should not happen between Awami League and BNP one day. As a developing country, we are not in a position to experiment with our newly re-established democracy.

Tomorrow, Rashed Khan Menon, MP, and General Secretary, Workers' Party of Bangladesh advances his arguments in favour of holding the next general elections under a caretaker government.

Mehrangate and ISI: The Final Clean-up?

Khaled Ahmed looks at the revelations made about the ISI in the 'Mehrangate' scandal and anticipates a final clean-up in the corridors of a secret organisation whose reputation for corruption and political interference grew during and after the Afghan war

GENERAL (Retired) Mirza Aslam Beg, it now develops, was at the centre of the murky deal that brought Habib Bank to the brink of a crash in 1991, led to the birth of Mehran Bank in 1992, and caused the ISI under the IJ-nominated General Javed Nasir to 'deposit' over US \$ 17 million and Rs 100 million to Mehran Bank to keep for an unspecified period, and thereafter tilted the entire political chessboard of the country dangerously close to a collapse.

Reports appearing in the national press say that Rs 140 million was given by Yunus Habib to General Beg from the coffers of Habib Bank when the latter was COAS in 1990. Beg says he informed President Ghulam Ishaq and later PM Nawaz Sharif that this money was a 'philanthropic' contribution to 'elections 1990'. It is understood that in 1991 he 'gave' Rs 60 million or thereabouts to the ISI where a record of it apparently exist under the rubric of 'Kashmir fund'.

There is however no record of what happened to the other Rs 80 million of the 'philanthropic' money that he says he gave to some 'election cell' under the wing of President Ishaq and Military Intelligence (MI). But it is understood that MI, which came under the writ of the COAS, has no record of the money General Beg says he gave to it. There is thus no formal record of the money he says he paid to the 'establishment's election cell'.

In fact, no official information about any kind of a cell exists. However, there was much reporting during and after elections 1990 about the existence of a 'cell' inside the presidency under retired General Rafiqat who was adviser to Ghulam Ishaq Khan. This cell apparently also featured Gen Beg himself, ISI chief General Asad Durrani and General Hamid Gul (then corps commander Multan).

All the inmates of the infamous cell had one common objective: to defeat the PPP at the polls through rigging. Press reports say that money was paid to some politicians backed by Gen Beg in the elections. He wanted Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi to win so that, after becoming prime minister, Jatoi could elevate General Beg from the rank of COAS to a revamped Joint Chiefs position, thus giving him another tenure at the head of the armed forces. Another report says that after the polls, Gen-

eral Beg tried to buy off some of the Nawaz Sharif MNAs to pressure the new prime minister into giving him the appointment he wanted. He is alleged to have paid Rs 20 million to MNA Javed Hashmi for this purpose with money that was coughed up by Yunus Habib once again, this time through the Mehran Bank. A similar amount was paid by Yunus Habib to the MQM chief Altaf Hussain after a meeting arranged by him between the 'Muhajir' leader and the COAS.

Does this mean that the money 'left over' with Gen Beg from the Rs 140 million was not all spent on elections, and that Yunus Habib kept bankrolling the general's schemes in excess of the 'philanthropic' contribution? Where is the money General Beg says was 'given' to the 'election cell' and the MI? As for General Beg, he has never lacked for money after his retirement. His FRIENDS, a research NGO, is a lavishly funded set-up about whose financial origins the general remains stubbornly silent.

Because Beg had 'milked' Yunus Habib to fulfill his own ambition of a take-over or extension and the latter had 'milked' Habib Bank, the first rumblings began to be felt in the victim bank in 1991. Habib Bank (Sindh) feared that around Rs 5 billion had been lost due to the malpractices of Yunus Habib. Beg interceded for Habib at the State Bank, thus no action was taken. He also helped Yunus Habib open his Mehran Bank in 1992 and they used his influence to get him the various lucrative accounts that would bail him out. Mehran Bank soon landed in trouble because Yunus Habib helped himself to its money liberally through fictitious loans and through greasing the numerous palms who had worked to keep him out of the clutches of the State Bank.

This is where the ISI comes in again. In 1992 it was being headed by General Javed Nasir, an engineer with no experience in the service he was now asked to run by Nawaz Sharif. Nasir replaced Gen Asad Durrani who had, meanwhile, switched loyalty to the new army chief Gen Asif Nawaz who had antagonised Nawaz by firing his blue-eyed Gen Hameed Gul. Nasir was supposed to be a relative of Mian Nawaz Sharif's Intelligence Bu-

reau chief Brigadier Imitiaz Ahmad and therefore an ISI loyalist.

Gen Javed Nasir was an ardent member of the Tableeghi Jamaat, much given to revolutionary sermonising to his juniors and deeply convinced of the immaculacy of his 'strategic' thinking which was akin to the Islamic enthusiasm expressed at different times by Beg and Gul some journalistic comment now says that it was General Javed Nasir who had 'inspired' Beg's hair-brained strategies of 'depth' and 'defiance' when the former was a part of the top-brass.

Beg is supposed to have asked Javed Nasir to bail out Yunus Habib's new bank (where Beg's daughter's father-in-law now appeared as a director, his pockets heavy with loans) and Javed Nasir is supposed to have sent around US \$ 17 million (not US \$ 39 million as reported in the press) plus Rs 100 million of ISI's funds to be deposited in Mehran Bank. The additional

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truth may be that the ISI general, for a consideration known in vulgar idiom as 'kick-back', might have agreed to keep the account at Mehran Bank 'fixed' for some years.

Beg had sewed up the deal, it seemed. But Javed Nasir soon got his ISI into trouble by riding it as a runaway revolutionary organisation stoking the fires of upheaval in Pakistan's neighbourhood. He was 'recalled' from the job in April 1993 during the regime of Mr Balakh Sher Mazari, making way for a professional soldier named Lt-General Javed Ashraf Qazi. Beg once again got into trouble when the new ISI chief decided to 'violate' the terms agreed by Javed Nasir and take the money out of Mehran Bank.

Just when Yunus Habib thought he was out of trouble (in addition to ISI, his bank was handling public accounts of Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and NWFP), General Qazi pulled the rug from under his feet by demanding the ISI's money. When the ISI dollars weren't forthcoming from Mehran Bank, there was a

yawning gap of default that the State Bank didn't like. Although Habib was able to cough up the ISI deposit in installments, by February 1994 another rescue operation was needed. The 'package deal' devised by his patrons this time was sale of US \$ 37 million certificates (FEBCs) for which the State Bank which was made to give permission in the face of all the past trespasses of Mr Habib known to it. It was his failure to deposit the proceeds of the FEBCs at the State Bank, and a 'bold' decision by the new governor State Bank, that he was finally arrested in March this year.

General Beg who is said to still occupy Yunus Habib's house in Defence Karachi, sensed that his 'activities' had caught up with him, and decided to join the PML after this arrest. PML (J) leaders like the Saifullahs in the NWFP had been reported as showing interest in Yunus Habib's overtures for a take-over rescue bid of Mehran Bank. Beg's

of the funds meant for the mujahideen, the arms shipments meant for the 'jihad' and the 'costs' debited to the US government for the conduct of a 'remote-control' war against the Soviets. General Liaquat's remark on the book is that had General Zia lived he would never have forgiven Brigadier Yusuf for what he had revealed.

One 'warrior' the book challenges is General Hamid Gul whom Mian Nawaz Sharif 'Sheltered' after he was fired for insubordination by COAS General Asif Nawaz in 1992. Javed Nasir's 'new order' at the ISI was often described by the officers there as 'Hamid Gul style'... something that the new incumbent General Javed Ashraf Qazi was obliged to confront when he took over in 1993. The new DG-ISI is said to have found most of the 'brigadiers' absent without information as to which country they were visiting; also, the money they had withdrawn as 'expenses' had no sanction from the earlier ISI chief.

It was a free-wheeling kind of organisation where the chief had allowed everyone his head. General Qazi discovered, it is said, that his predecessor had personally allowed expenditures that remained without any rationale. These transactions included pay-offs to individuals, purchase of property at rates that didn't match market prices, and mysterious 'events' like a fashion show at Dubai costing the government Rs 20 million.

Coercion has, in the past, saved the ISI's reputation from the blows that it could have received from Pakistani politics. It has had the capacity to 'hire' people in all walks of life; it has the capacity to order any organ of the state to take extra-legal action in the name of nationalism; and it has kept a number of journalists on leash to 'feed' stories and keep its personae non grata under pressure.

ISI was said to have inherited the mythology of new nationalism created by General Zia after he had hanged Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The centre-piece of this mythology was that the Bhutto family were at Pakistanis and that the PPP was a party not loyal to the ideology of Pakistan. Its greatest scandal before General Javed Nasir made over its funds to Mehran Bank was the

Midnight Jackals' operation to topple the PPP government. (This presumes that we are willing to forget the Ojir Camp blast that traumatised the country).

Two of its operatives were caught red handed offering bribes to PPP MNAs when the latter video-recorded the entire episode in 1989. After being kicked out of the ISI, the two were reemployed by Mian Nawaz Sharif as Director Intelligence Bureau (Brig Imitiaz as Director FIA (Major Amer). Now Major Amer is said to be close to Mr Asif Zardari who has disclosed in a recent interview that the major has admitted to conspiracies against the PPP in general and against Asif Zardari in particular.

ISI's past is pretty murky. After the Mehran Bank scandal, its image may sink sink further unless it insists on a clean-up. The trend so far has been that the GGO has hushed up the scandals to save the reputation of the army from being tarnished by acts of individuals (General Beg has steadily humiliated the GHQ, when General Asif was in power, through his reckless maunderings in the press). It is up to the new DG to restore the ISI's image as the professional outfit it is now supposed to be.

Gen Beg's last act was the contempt he committed against the Supreme Court of Pakistan in 1993 but he was saved from being convicted only because the chief justice of the honourable court decided to conduct himself in a peculiar fashion. But Beg has no transgressed to an extent that he can't be rescued; the events that have unfolded since January this year indicate that the ISI should not rest until its has purified its image.

Unfortunately, chances are that the civilian set-up might find itself to mired in the muck of Mehran Bank to take any redemptive action. This is what Beg would want and his statements seem to indicate that he wants more and more of the people in power and the opposition to be named in the proceedings. If the civilians chicken out, the stables inside the ISI may not get sufficiently cleaned. Despite the fact that the current ISI chief, General Qazi, has already set things to rights, the trail behind him smells too foul for the public to start feeling immediately good about the ISI. More needs to be done.

Courtesy: the Friday Times

To the Editor...

Two-Nation Theory

Sir, I refer to the news item published in different newspapers about the British professor Meghnad Desai who passed a comment on the 'two-nation theory'. In his statement he said 'the partition of the sub-continent is the costliest mistake in the history'. I appreciate his bold statement and want to express my views about the 'two-nation theory'. That Pakistan was created for the entire Muslims of the sub-continent, but now only 12 crore Muslims are 'safe' in Pakistan while more than the number are 'insecure' in India due to the partition of the sub-continent. They are being persecuted everyday in terms of

communal feelings and transgression of human rights. The reactionary forces in India every now and then taunt and jeer them to bundle up for Pakistan.

Innumerable people of Bangladesh lost their lives in 1971 due to Pakistan. Consequently, more than two lakh Urdu-speaking people have been leading a miserable life in different camps of Bangladesh. Thousands of these unfortunate Urdu-speaking people were displaced and separated from their relatives due to the partition of the sub-continent. Atrocities and injustice are continuing on Mohajir community in Sindh province of Pakistan. All these sorrowful incidents happened only be-

cause of the partition of the sub-continent. Then how one will sincerely appreciate the 'two-nation theory' which was made to fail?

If 'two-nation theory' apparently means freedom only for Punjabis, Bengalis, Baluchis, Sindhis and Pathans on regional basis keeping aside the majority of the Muslims insecure in India then why not one will condemn this theory and the partition of the sub-continent?

Zafar Iqbal
New Babupara, Saidpur

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Sir, An Indian born British teacher of economics specifi-

cally identified the 'two-nation theory' and Farakka issue, which were far away from his academic credential.

Prof Meghnad Desai's 'Meet the Press' in Dhaka has created mixed reaction in north-east Bangladesh.

L R Khan
Serail Colony, Rajshahi

Income tax on dividend income

Sir, It is surprising to note that while on the one hand the government is trying all channels to boost investment in the country, on the other some of the measures taken by the

government are acting as barriers to the same. During the last budget, the government imposed income tax at the rate 10% on dividend income exceeding Tk 5,000/- from the shares of public limited companies. In fact the companies pay dividend to their shareholders after paying income tax on the income of the companies. So how the 'tax paid' income is being 'taxed again' before distributing it to the shareholders? Furthermore, shareholders whose personal income exceeds the income tax limit do pay income tax on their own.

This is a serious matter and should be looked upon by the Finance Ministry before the

coming budget. The small investors who are now coming to the share market should be given a good climate so that they find it more profitable to invest in the capital market rather than in fixed assets like purchasing land etc.

On behalf of the small investor, I request the concerned authority to waive the income tax on dividend income from the shares of the public limited companies. I am sure this measure will certainly attract many prospective investors to invest in the stock market. After all we cannot cut the same hen several times.

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