

Regional Causes

As chairperson of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's visit to Nepal has been specially significant. The two countries witnessed popular and peaceful democratic surges against autocracy and monarchy respectively almost at the same time. While we have been able to throw out autocracy, the Nepalese people have made a sort of constitutional arrangement for democracy and monarchy to co-exist. In that arrangement Nepal is working as a political laboratory where experiments with the two systems are showing results. Democracy is demonstrating a kind of vibrancy in Nepal, based on a manifest spirit of national reconciliation.

So Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has been to a country that has grown in confidence during the past four years and is ready now to reach out to the world around. The country's new leadership did not take time to mention where both nations have common interests and hold similar views. Their identical views have been focused on the need for strengthening SAARC as a regional body eager to work with ASEAN and EU. The issues that came to the fore are environment, water, trade and transit facilities. As a land-locked country, Nepal should naturally consider its transit via India and Bangladesh as vitally important.

India and Nepal recognise the value of joint efforts in the management of the Himalayan water resources. Nepal and Bangladesh also think that there should be trilateral cooperation to harness the common rivers to their maximum collective benefit.

Bangladesh has offered transit facility at Mongla Port to Nepal but unless India co-operates, Nepal cannot use the facility. Similarly as an upper riparian country Nepal may extend some facility to augment water flows into the common rivers of the three countries. This will help us receive an increased share of water during the dry season. If India does not take part in the deal, it will be incomplete.

All the three countries need to cooperate in the field of environment to enjoy nature's bounties. Thus by the dictates of geography and hydrology, India, Bangladesh and Nepal are required to cooperate for the betterment of the lot of their peoples.

Banks' Credibility

Although financial sector reform is an unfinished agenda with the government, Finance Minister Saifur Rahman breathed some fresh air into it on Thursday in a meeting with top functionaries of public and private sector banks. The refreshing nature of his exposition lay in the fact that he did not seemingly forget to be self-analytical while subjecting others to criticism on grounds of biased conduct of business to favour hand-picked few.

He does not exclude the government from focus when he says that the banking system should not be used to assist particular sectors or interest groups. Saifur Rahman suggests very rightly that the NCBS should be allowed to be operated strictly on commercial basis, shorn of any interference by the government in their decision-making processes.

As for the private sector banks of local or collaborative origin, the tendency towards concentration of ownership or monopoly control of a single group or family of share-holders needs checkmating to ward off favouritism in their operations.

These are very important parameters of change the Finance Minister has delineated to be addressed in earnest to re-orient the banking system towards serving the depositors, stepping up national productivity and strengthening the process of financial and monetary discipline in the economy. Default culture is detrimental to the economy in several ways. It means a breach of trust with the depositors on whose money the banks thrive and prosper. It is like robbing Paul to pay Peter as well as cutting the root of a tree they are perched on. Many private banks have gone in the red through bad business lately, so that people have started eyeing with suspicion any new banking proposal which is rather a loss to this particular spirit of enterprise. Furthermore, a credibility gap has developed between some multilateral banking institutions which have traditionally supported the leading operations of our specialised financial institutions because of the latter's poor track record on loan recoveries.

The banks' role as a conduit of favour distribution needs to be a closed chapter.

Poisoned Delicacy

It is bone-chilling to know that DDT with which we sprinkled our backyards the other day to stave off mice-induced plague has been routinely gulped down by eaters of dried fish with their morsels of food.

Dried fish, a popular delicacy, which is relished by so many people in the country, has been found out to be powdered with DDT as a preservative against bacteria that threaten to infest any dead organism. A vernacular daily reported this the other day. The white flakes on the dead bodies of the fish so long passed off unsuspectingly as some perfectly harmless detergent. There was nothing scary about its look at least; but one wonders why the fact about the lethal poisonous mix took so long a time to be uncovered and made public, when all that was needed to drop the bombshell was a simple laboratory test. And if the knowledge of it was callously kept secret, it is a much greater offence on the part of the authorities concerned for their sheer dereliction of duty than the one originally committed by those who had kept poisoning the fish with DDT.

This item has also had an export market where, we believe, the traders could not have gone scot free about the DDT with screening abroad. Some other 'preservative' must have been used in the export consignments. If this is true then it rebounds as an additional outrage that hundreds of thousands of our compatriots in the country ate the poisonous food.

We suggest two remedial measures. First, all the DDT-contaminated fish must be banned from the market. Secondly, dried fish should be released to the market after irradiation which is calculated to add only a few taka more to the price.

THE modern nation state was born in Europe. France was the pioneer. Spain and England quickly followed her and by early 19th century the nation state came to be accepted as the norm throughout the world. Quite apart from the conflicts and wars between nation states which were fought with great zeal, barriers against foreign citizens were erected by them at the borders and the system of passports and visas became an universal practice. Other restrictions on account of health and security were later introduced.

A visitor to a foreign country these days gets the feeling, after stepping on a foreign soil, that he is eyed with suspicion by his grudging hosts as a potential dangerous criminal, smuggler, terrorist or carrier of exotic and loathsome diseases, unless, of course, he can prove otherwise. The orator of proof about one's innocence rests on the luckless traveller. It is an irony in these days of easy and comfortable air travel that at the end of a pleasant journey a traveller stands in a long line of passengers and faces grim-looking men and women who search their long and computerized lists to ensure that all the undesirable elements are prevented from entering their country. Even the most blameless of souls heaves a sigh of relief when the man or woman behind the counter returns his travel documents and nods him to pass the awe-inspiring line symbolizing legal entry into the country.

All this has however changed for seven European states beginning from 26 March, 1995. From this day onwards seven members of the European Union — France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain and Portugal — lifted national controls on their common borders.

Nine European Union countries committed themselves, ten years ago, to abolishing internal border checks at the town of Schengen, where the borders of Germany, France and Luxembourg converge. Despite the long wait of ten

A World without Borders: Western Europe Takes a Giant Stride

From 26 March, 1995 onwards seven members of the European Union — France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain and Portugal — lifted national controls on their common borders.

years, the process of lifting border controls has not been easy. In fact, Britain, Ireland and Denmark still refuse to take part in the arrangement. These three countries are not yet prepared to permit people to move across national borders as freely as goods, services and capital. It should be noted, however, that the Treaty of Rome, the Union's founding treaty, guarantees these four freedoms. Nationals of the seven countries can now travel across common state boundaries without passports. These countries will now abolish their border check posts. However, while border controls have been abolished within the Schengen group of countries, external controls will be reinforced against illegal immigration and international crime. In fact, people from non-EU countries will probably face stricter controls. Asians and Africans are not going to have an easier time.

Viewed in the context of all the radical measures towards integration already taken by the European Union countries in recent years, this is not a spectacular change. Yet the significance of the step cannot be under-estimated. It marks the reversal of a policy that, for almost two hundred years, was accepted as most natural. To keep the citizens of other nation states away was considered not only a matter of right but almost of virtue.

During the Cold War days the trend was for tighter and stricter controls. The increase in the incidence of terrorist attacks across international borders heightened the security concerns of governments, and added to the sense of hostility and distrust bordering on paranoia towards foreigners. This was not however the

situation in the olden days. Kingdoms and Empires usually cut across tribal, cultural, linguistic and even identifiable national boundaries. The Ottoman Empire, for example, was a polyglot state in which peoples of different language, race and culture had equal status. Kemal Ataturk ended the Caliphate and established a Turkish national state in the image of the European nation

bringing international tourism within the realms of possibility for many millions. The growth of international trade, improvements in telecommunications and the linking of the world's media through satellite also contributed to strengthening this trend towards global integration.

Thus we see these two contradictory trends competing for ascendancy throughout

beginning of the process — though perhaps a slow process. The SAARC region has even further to travel along this path. With the globalization of international trade and finance and trends towards opening up economies the movement towards greater integration has become unstoppable. Efforts to maintain artificial barriers to protect the interests of groups enjoying economic returns to labour, capital or technical skills out of line with the international market will be expensive, and ultimately, futile. The kind of factor-price equalization that is the 'Holy Grail' of free-trade purists may well be unattainable in a dynamic setting. However, it will be closer to a future reality where vast differences in factor incomes will be difficult to sustain.

We are yet far from the

stage when we can contemplate a widespread relaxation of controls at the border. Perhaps with the passage of time hardened attitudes will change, and the 'brotherhood of man' which John Lennon described in his visionary song 'Imagine' will yet become a reality. The Germans and the French thought of each other as nothing but actual or potential enemies for several centuries; they fought bloody wars whose memories have not yet fully faded. Yet they have decided to see each other as human beings and not merely as the French and the Germans.

Europe's transformation is the result of a fundamental change in perceptions which is shared not only by its leaders but also by the common men and women. In South Asia we are very far from that kind of enlightenment but is there any harm in keeping that as the final goal? Indeed, the vision of a world in which harsh and often artificial barriers will not be erected against people's right to move freely and achieve their potential as human beings should be the ultimate goal. The European Union deserves to be congratulated for having taken a giant step in that direction.

ON THE RECORD

by Shah A M S Kibria



states. The Moghul Empire in India was a multi-national state in which the immigrant Moghuls, perhaps, were a dominant element but most other groups lived side by side without any conscious awareness about their 'national identity and national interests'. During this century these have become sacred words and for many no moral price was too great to be paid in the pursuit of narrow national interests. A whole new set of value systems have grown around the concept of nation states.

While the trend towards ever-increasing controls at the state borders was getting stronger, a parallel trend was also gathering momentum. This was the dramatic growth in international tourism. The desire to travel and see the world is ingrained in human nature and has driven men and women across mountains, deserts, dense jungles and uncharted oceans. Technological developments in air travel over the past quarter century have sharply reduced costs, thus

the world. In Europe the strength of the exclusive nation state is diminishing while the common humanity of the people is getting emphasized. Regrettably, the Europeans are not prepared to extend the facilities to all others who do not belong to their exclusive club.

The trend towards the weakening of the grip of the nation state is however unmistakable. The Americans and Canadians could not have imagined even a decade ago that they would form any sort of common market with Mexico and yet that is what has actually happened. We have witnessed with admiration the emergence of a truly multi-racial state in South Africa, which it is expected, will lead the movement towards African economic cooperation.

In Asia the trend is still too weak to be taken seriously. Yet the tentative effort by the ASEAN countries to liberalize their trade, harmonize standards and ease their border control procedures signals the

Debacle of Indian Assembly Elections: Future of Congress

by Nikhil Chakravarty

The ignominious loss of Gujarat and Maharashtra ministries by the Congress further demoralised the party and devalued the leadership particularly when it was found that a major reason for the debacle in both the States is due to factionalism within the party...

AFTER the devastation that the recent assembly elections have inflicted on the standing of the Congress leadership in the public eye, there is little sign of its capacity to fight back and stem the rot. One is tempted to ask: is the Congress in a position to regain the damage in time for the parliamentary general election which is due within a year but events may force it earlier?

An army suffering a setback tries immediately to regroup its forces and reviews its line of operation. But when defeat brings demoralisation, it may be faced with the prospect of disintegration. There are many instances in history of such a fate overtaking established political parties. Demoralisation paves the way for defeatism, and unless a very strong leadership of outstanding calibre takes over, a party in that state is more likely to crack-up than regroup.

Much the same scenario has opened up today as one watches the state of the Congress today — utter demoralisation and embittered relationship between the leadership and a good section of the party ranks. And there is in sight no leadership of outstanding eminence who can hammer the Congress party into shape. In fact, there is hardly anybody who on his own commands the allegiance of the party ranks outside his own State. The signboard of the Congress being a national party does not really represent the true state of the party.

A brief review of the happenings in the last three months brings out this sorry state of affairs. When the poll debacle in Andhra and Karnataka shook the complacency of the Congress leadership in mid-December, it was expected that this might lead to a determined bid to reinvigorate the party. Nothing of the kind happened. Instead of a serious review, there was stunned silence, and out of this state of torpor, the first explosive development was the resignation of Arjun Singh from the Cabinet. While he made a veritable charge-sheet

against the government particularly against the Prime Minister, there was no effective response from the government side after a meeting of the party Working Committee, where no decision was taken about Arjun Singh's parting of the company with the Prime Minister-cum-Congress President. This passivity on the part of the Congress leadership emboldened Arjun more as he released the text of his massive communication with the Prime Minister and others in government. Suddenly the party's disciplinary action committee expelled Arjun Singh from the membership of the party, which judging by precedents from the annals of the Congress, was totally uncalled for, as criticism of any specific action by any leader is not regarded as being tantamount to the breaking of the party.

What is worth noting is that the disciplinary action committee was itself on its decision to expel Arjun Singh, as one of the members, Antony did not agree with the rest, and so the committee did not formally meet and ultimately it was through an extraordinary devious logic, the party high command — which is actually the party president — got rid of Arjun Singh. He was an elected member of the Congress Working Committee, but he was not given a hearing before the Working Committee. The posture of high-handedness on the part of the Congress leadership resulted in an accretion of strength for Arjun Singh.

The fact that Arjun Singh's substantive charges — for instance, the government's passivity over the Babri Masjid demolition, absence of punishment of the guilty in the securities scam as disclosed by

the JPC and the common man's woes as a result of the economic reforms — were left unanswered by the Congress leadership exposed its weakness rather than strength. The mishandling of Narayan Dutt Tewari by the Congress leadership during the last three months is another example of its ineffectiveness. First, there was an effort to win over Tewari and to prevent his joining hands with Arjun Singh. This did not succeed. Then came the stand that Tewari was regarded as a member of the Congress Working Committee, though he was bypassed in the setting up of a new Congress Committee for UP. After the Bhopal rally, there was a howl against Tewari by the cronies claiming to be loyal to Narasimha Rao.

Meanwhile, the ignominious loss of Gujarat and Maharashtra ministries by the Congress further demoralised the party and devalued the leadership particularly when it was found that a major reason for the debacle in both the States is due to factionalism within the party which was actually fuelled by the wrong move of the party high command blatantly backing one group against the other. The virtually total boycott of the Congress by the Muslim voters added to the party's disgrace. Against this background came the dissidents' move for a mass rally at Hussainiwalla in Punjab on the anniversary of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom. Instead of letting the occasion pass, the ever-bungling disciplinary action committee leaders, particularly Beant Singh and Balram Jhakar, threatened Tewari with dire consequences if he attended the martyrdom rally in the company of Arjun Singh. Inevitably, this had the effect of only pro-

voking Tewari, who immediately sent in his letter of resignation from the Congress Working Committee. This bundling was sought to be papered over by beseeching implorings by some of the other members of Narasimha Rao's establishment while Beant Singh and Jhakar were made to look rather foolish.

The dissident's rally saw a great turn-out, before whom Tewari openly thundered that Narasimha Rao should give up the party presidency and not combine it with the prime ministership. Rather an awkward jam for the party high command. They can hardly afford to throw out Tewari, nor can they readily swallow Tewari's campaign for Rao giving up the post of the party president.

Another dose of discredit for the Congress leadership came from its mishandling of the Kerala crisis. It was known for a long time that the continuation of Karunakaran as Chief Minister would spell the doom of the Congress in that State, but Narasimha Rao followed his traditional line of total inaction and left Karunakaran to misbehave as he liked. When it came to the point of immediate collapse of the ministry with revolt of two allied parties and also a considerable section of the Congress MLAs, the Congress president had to force Karunakaran to step down and send Antony to take over. But this change-over was done in such a clumsy manner letting Karunakaran to behave in a dishonourable fashion. All this has discredited the party president since Karunakaran has long posed as being very close to the Prime Minister.

With such a basketful of messy mishandling of events and personalities within the party, one finds hardly any sign of any possibility of a revival of the Congress moral and popularity as the party is inexorably drifting towards the judgement day of the next Lok Sabha general election.

— Mandira NIKHIL CHAKRAVARTY is Editor of 'Mainstream' and an eminent Indian journalist.

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Fatal Concealment

JUST when you start to believe this all the news is bad and there's no hope for America, something happens that gives you new faith in the country. The other day I opened Time magazine, and its lead story concerned laws being passed by more and more states allowing people to carry concealed weapons. "It's a tidal wave," a delighted Tanya K Metaksa of the National Rifle Association was quoted as saying.

Every Republican presidential candidate seems to be getting on the pro-gun bandwagon, which makes me sleep soundly at night.

I've always been a concealed weapons' type of guy. It's sensual with me. I love to feel a Smith and Wesson or a Glock against my chest. I like to hold a 9 mm in my hands and, when no one is looking, stroke the barrel or rub the grip. But I'm wise enough to know that when you carry a concealed weapon you have to use some discretion.

For example, I would never shoot at another motorist unless he tried to take my parking place at the supermarket.

I am the kind of American that the NRA points to as an example of a law-abiding citizen who can be trusted with a hidden handgun.

When I go into a store and the clerk gives me the wrong change, I am not going to shoot him. That would be tacky. At the same time, if I'm at a basketball game and the fans sitting behind give me a lot of guff, I believe they should have the daylight scared out of them.

When a state gives its citizens the right to carry concealed weapons, it also assumes that the person will be responsible and remove all the bullets from it when he comes home. There have been accidents in the house — children shooting children, adults shooting children, children shooting adults — but that's the price you have to pay if you want a normal, happy family.

I have friends who think that I am paranoid about carrying a gun. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Of course, I keep one in the drawer at my office — but what choice do I have? Suppose some salesman tries to sell me a bottled water service and I don't want it.

He'll leave a lot faster if I point the old Uzi at his forehead. The big argument against concealed weapons is that a deranged person could carry one and all of a sudden shoot up the White House. Well, the answer to that is, why should the rest of us suffer because one person has a grudge against the Administration?

Listen, I am determined to defend myself. If some teacher bawls out my kid for acting up on the school bus, it will be the last time she takes the law into her own hands.

If you're thinking about jumping the line in a Pizza Hut, don't even try it, or you'll be eating cold steel before you order the pepperoni. Test me not, I carry one pistol under my pants and the other in my sock.

Most of all with a gun I feel good about myself. I feel as if the NRA cares about me. It's the first time I've been this secure since Sen. Robert Dole said that he would repeal the assault weapons ban by this summer.

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OPINION

Degenerative Leadership

M M Ahmad

I am responding, as a reader, to the Editor's invitation, to comment on the current political crisis in the country: the so-called caretaker government for the general elections.

The political crisis has been deliberately and artificially created by the so called political leadership who, deep inside, perhaps do not believe in the proposal offered, but are out to deceive the masses with whipped-up political media (fun fair) of the negative kind, to serve the party interest.

There is no novelty in this style of political jugglery, as the oppressed citizens in this part of the world are quite familiar with the motivations and antics of the often 'have-not' politicians, who are neither here nor there. When they cannot control themselves, how they will run the country? The basic qualities of leadership (in any field) need not be catalogued here: most of the qualities are common.

The issue is neither the caretaker government nor the elections. The real issues are the degenerative leadership, and indifference of the amateurish political parties (no field experience in autocratic environment) to, and step-motherly treatment of, the baby Parliament. They have failed to introduce regenerative elements in the leadership since the partition of the sub-continent. We have seen how Pakistan broke up. We have also seen how Bangladesh was misgoverned since her birth. This is not a sweeping state-

ment, but a general statement, and history is the witness. The leaders are not leading, but lagging and sheltering behind the followers. The problem or the mindset was not created by the leaders, but by the masses, who spoiled the leaders by expecting too much; then changed leaders, and suffered more. Sometimes the leaders themselves replaced the other leaders, ignoring the people's verdict or expectations. It seems the accused became the judges, and went ahead to pronounce self-judgements. This suffering and exploitation continues today, in various shades and styles, much of it visible and suspect. This commentator, an average or low-brow intellectual (a chap who tries to 'think' in middle-class company) has lost faith in politics and political leadership. For this disillusionment, the political leaders are responsible, as they have so far failed to stand the test for two decades, if not more. They are incapable of delivering the goods or run the country. So another new generation of political leadership has to take over. Times are changing fast. Tune in or be left out (as one of the advertisements says). The leaders speak out clearly and loudly. So what's wrong if I do the same, against them? They are welcome to win me over (and thousands like me who are disillusioned), or face propaganda against them. Fair enough?

To the Editor...

Hartals, and thanks?

Sir, The opposition political leaders often give thanks to general public for cooperating and making hartals successful for which they had given call. It is very funny, because do the people really deserve this thanks? If the people had participated with enthusiasm then may be thanks are due to them. But this is not the case, citizens are compelled to refrain from normal activities to avoid unwanted situations and to save their property.

I think, if the political parties have given the option that everyone is free to observe hartal or not then it would

have been difficult to find persons who are willing to participate.

Already enough harm has been caused by these hartals, blockades and strikes. Political leaders should refrain from such activities, which they advocate to be for our benefit but we don't see any.

Nur Jahan East Nasirabad, Chittagong

Dhaka-Colombo ties

Sir, Sri Lanka has never been a foreign country to us. Our relations dated back 25 centuries old when Prince Vi-

joy Singh of Vangadesh (Bangladesh) went to Sri Lanka on a good-will visit about 500 BC and settled down there.

Both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka fell victim to British colonial rule in the middle and the end of the 18th century respectively.

Eversince Bangladesh achieved her independence in 1971 the ties between Dhaka and Colombo started growing stronger and stronger day by day. We are proud that after the launching of the SAARC in 1985 both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka remain trusted friends of each other. In fact both the countries are destined to play

an important role, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, in shaping the destiny and a better future for millions of people in South Asia.

With a view to further improving and strengthening the existing relations between Bangladesh and Sri Lanka we suggest the following: 1) Opening of Dhaka-Male-Colombo air service. 2) Kualalumpur-Chittagong-Colombo shipping line service. 3) Promotion of cultural activities, sports and tourism among Malaysia, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1203