

Choice before SAARC

The tenth anniversary celebrations of SAARC in New Delhi, marked by a special session of the foreign ministers, have been more of a forward-looking than a sentimental commemorative occasion. The inaugural proceedings on Monday were enlivened by a candid exchange of opinions on the challenges facing the regional body in the next decade and how best to meet them through a fuller realisation of the SAARC potential.

That we have all but come out of the rhetoric phase and plunged headlong into grappling with concrete issues is a sign of maturity. What, however, is more to the point is: where exactly do we stand in terms of poverty banishment from the region by 2002 AD. South Asian poverty is not merely an economic failure it is also, in a very seminal sense, a manifestation of political tension in the region. Needless to say, contentious bilateral issues cast a shadow on the prospects for both individual and collective growth in the SAARC region. Quite true, the process of economic cooperation goes on despite the frayed political tempers and that the establishment of a South Asian Free Trade Area and the creation of a South Asian Development Fund are likely in the near future. But to be honest, these by themselves cannot stamp out poverty. What is basically needed to fight poverty is a congenial and productive regional environment, shorn of excessive military expenditures, in which South Asia as a whole emerges as an economic constellation.

The spirit which is now half-in and half-out should spring forth with a new era dawning for competition an excellence in good things. In fact, as a break-through confidence-builder at the people-to-people level, we are all for a speedy removal of the visa restrictions in the SAARC region.

Could we perhaps rename the poverty alleviation strategy as a programme for prosperity whose basic ingredients are abundantly available? Why be melancholic about the start? Imagine the huge potential of our common rivers waiting to be harnessed against droughts and floods and as sources of hydro-electric power and navigational links. The question is of intent: whether we want to prosper and be launched into the developed world or be satisfied with lip-services to poverty eradication.

The Transfer Question

The Election Commission in one of its directives has sought immediate transfer of deputy commissioners, superintendents of police, thana nirbahi officers and officers-in-charge posted for three years in the same place. Customary almost everywhere, the practice is resorted to for the sake of making administration impartial so that at no point officers at key administrative positions can influence election proceedings or results. On that count it is a welcome move on the part of the EC.

Like the three years' stipulation, yet another stipulation of time-limit is also enforced by the EC. This concerns a time-frame before the holding of national election, within which period no transfers at the above mentioned positions are allowed. Now there have been newspaper reports and allegations mostly from the opposition that the ruling BNP government had resorted to a flurry of transfers earlier on with an eye to the elections. Some such transfers might have been routine — we don't contest that.

However, this is an allegation worth looking into by the EC. Even though the EC will control the administration for a period up to the conducting of polls and announcement of the results, it cannot expect the things to go on ideally if the allegation is even partially true. Moreover, it is a must for the EC to earn people's trust. After all, any abuse of the delegated authority in the system will largely reflect on the EC. So it is in the EC's interest that it should correct any deficiencies that might have crept into the electoral arrangements. What the EC perhaps can do now is review the administrative structure at the relevant tiers and take remedial measures, where necessary, to ensure the holding of truly free and fair elections.

Why the LPG Crisis?

A severe crisis of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) has been causing tremendous hardship to households in the northern region of the country. Part of the explanation for the crisis is no doubt logistic but the rest — and the major part — is man-made. Perhaps our businessmen or dealers in their genius for creating artificial crises and cashing in on the consumers' suffering. Reportedly, the cylinder dealers are responsible for the domestic fuel crisis in the northern district towns.

Like fertilizer, the LPG is produced in the public sector. Private dealership is a mechanism used for distribution of the same with an assured margin of profit to the dealers. The rule of the business is that no dealer runs the risk of incurring loss nor is one allowed to sell the commodity beyond a price fixed by the government. But the dealers, not satisfied with the profit margin, resort to all kinds of manipulation to make a windfall. This has been going on for a long time. Ever since political considerations came sometimes to override commercial ones the genuine dealers have to that extent, been left in the lurch.

The mismanagement and irregularities — which were of a scandalous proportion in the distribution of fertilizer — should have given a lesson for us. To ensure a smooth and fair distribution of commodities like the LPG the government needs not step in but it should allow the business considerations to be made a short shrift of.

The West and the US Must Meet Their Obligations to the Third World

by Md Asadullah Khan

THE Third World countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are in a state of despair, torment and chaos. Most of the problems of strife, tension and leuds stem from abysmal poverty. Looking at the filth and decay, the turbulence and misery in these countries evoking that of a sub-Saharan country like Ethiopia or Somalia, — the homeless sleeping in the streets, the haze of drugs and crime that have infected our society, we are convinced that the western countries mainly the USA and the West European countries, the resource tank of the world, have almost forgotten their obligations to these countries. Undoubtedly, America is a country that can give others its ideals of freedom, justice and its formula for creating wealth and its generosity. Global leadership that has gone to America in this decade for its spectacular success in ending the Cold War between the two super-powers and because of the failure of the Soviet totalitarian system to ease out the problems of human beings, the US must further advance towards alleviation of pain, hunger and prevent exploitation of the weaker nations by the stronger ones.

President Clinton's address to the Americans on the eve of his endorsement of 20,000 member peace-keeping troops mobilisation in Bosnia-Herzegovina after Dayton agreement between the warring factions telecast over the Satellite TV, is quite inspiring and heartening to the viewers of the world at large.

True, America can't work as the world's police force, but it can bring peace to a region battered by aggression and human rights violation and ensure the same to the victims of aggression and conspiracy. Right after the

victory of World War II, America has assumed its role of global leadership and has been most inclined to its duty toward itself and toward mankind in distress in different parts of the globe. Of course, there has been some mis-adventure, as ex-President L B Johnson committed in perpetuating the Vietnam war for long 15 years to the peril of the Americans and also the Vietnamese. Happily, American leadership did not falter starting from the time of Cuban missile crisis even in the days when Soviet Union emerged as a nuclear power, when Communism spread across the map, and even when the US was ig-

nfluenced by the US-led revival of Europe and Japan after World War II, by the solidarity of NATO and by the drive to establish human rights and by the example of the US and western economic success. Political analysts are wondering if the US-led supremacy could still be there when Japan slowly and steadily was rising as an economic super-power and European Community continued to push up as a trade-rival. Pragmatists also believe that Japan, despite its fantastic growth in the economic front and industrial sector, has failed to put its clout on Third World countries or the impoverished countries of

life — which now stands at an abysmal low level. Speaking of free-enterprise, it can't be in America if it is not done in the other parts of the world. More than ever, the Third World countries, including Bangladesh, need an international economy with open trade — free from protectionist policies.

Democracy, once regarded by many as hopelessly inefficient compared with the planned and regimented system has proved itself indispensable to productive economies. Socialistic pattern, for reasons not known to many has failed to create abundance.

With the demise of Com-

munism in Soviet Russia and other East European countries as well as cessation of Cold War, American expenditure on defence and weapon production will substantially diminish, allowing this great country to play its obligations to others mired in distress and recession. And now America and western Europe can exert its power that will be economic, and not military. Our part of the world: Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are yet to enter into an era of economics and quite shockingly, this part of the world will remain mired in a non-economic atavistic forces of religion, ethnicity, and fundamentalism stemming from lack of education, cultural obsession and scientific knowledge. Since our outlook, cultural bias and upbringing are rooted in shal-

lowness, we can't see how much the European Community is trying to build a supra-national order, based on economic cooperation and competition, material self-interest, and above all, on reason. Beyond western Europe and the US, our part of the world like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, the whole Arab world including Egypt and Algeria, is threatened by national, tribal and religious conflict pitting one against the other. Hopefully, despite the present intractability of atavistic conflict, these wounds may ultimately be mitigated by the transform-

ation" to the whole world but the US, affluent as it is, should extend and release its foreign aid to well-targeted projects in this part of the world. It must help by seeking an open trading system in which underdeveloped countries can sell their products. More than anything else, western countries, and the US, should push for economic and political reforms, offering advice and entrepreneurial guidance that are needed most now.

It is totally unacceptable that the US being such an affluent country would dole out less than five per cent of its defence outlays toward foreign assistance. It is also unacceptable that at the moment when much of the world seeks to follow American political and economic ideals — the country should consider itself too broke to live up to these ideals. It is, therefore, desirable that a country that has reached such heights and feats of development must share the burden of development in this part of the world and must not accept mediocrity and slow decline so soon and so easily.

The Third World countries like us have greater expectation from the US especially for the fact that the country has unique social flexibility and its experience with blending many ethnic groups is an important advantage. At the same time for all the prosperity and munificent welfare arrangements, European countries show few signs of overcoming their traditional social rigidity. European countries are also xenophobic, especially hostile toward immigrants that was very recently demonstrated by the Germans towards the immigrants. So also is the case with Japanese who are much more inflexible socially and politically.

Endowed with all the good principles of justice, truth and charity, America must act as the powerhouse and stand by the impoverished countries in lifting the standard of life there... And speaking of free-enterprise, it can't be in America if it is not done in the other parts of the world, including Bangladesh — free from protectionist policies.

nominously defeated in Vietnam.

American venture is awash with victory over land and space. In technology, the US led most major developments from jet planes to computers. It pioneered the move from industrial to information technology. It did a lion's share of theoretical work in sciences. For better or worse, it built and used the atom bomb forever changing the calculus of war and peace. It took man to the moon. It played the major role in projecting democracy and market economy widely seen as doomed in this century's first half, to be a vital and successful system.

To be sure, socialistic or totalitarian-pattern might have collapsed because of its own flaws. But undeniably true, the process was vitally

Africa and Asia because of its extreme isolationism in the realm of world events. And that gives the US a dominance over others. Japan hardly associates with the catastrophe that grips others. Shockingly true, Japan could not send a single soldier to fight for the allied forces when the whole world stood up to confront Saddam Hussein.

Sadly true, American leadership these-days are faltering. Speaking more precisely, it is almost failing. US leadership must now be extended to the entire world to help feed the people who are hungry and destitute. Endowed with all the good principles of justice, truth and charity, America must act as the powerhouse and stand by the impoverished countries in lifting the standard of their

ing promise of economic progress, of a better life as it happened in Europe. Western Countries including the US must come ahead to help the impoverished, debt-ridden Third World in making their way along the only path forward — the free market painful and politically explosive though that is. Without any contradiction, the developed world needs the countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka as markets. Unless the western countries soften their attitude and come ahead with a big hand, economic turmoil in this fragile areas would put heavy pressures on the US and other western countries at least through growing streams of emigrants.

People do neither expect nor even ask that the US would become "Good Samari-

BJP Puts its Best Foot Forward

Nikhil Chakravartty writes from New Delhi

A major handicap that the BJP leadership has to face is with regard to the Muslim minority. In fact, its political stand brings it into direct confrontation not only with the Muslim community but with a large segment of political leadership stretching from the Centre to the Left.

THE BJP conclave at Bombay is yet to be assessed seriously by both its friends and adversaries. On one hand, there is the feeling that the BJP is no longer a unified house, that strains and differences within the most wellknt party in the country are now coming out into the open. On the other hand, there is as yet no clear assessment by non-BJP parties about the line of campaign that the BJP leadership would follow during the coming period preceding the general elections.

What is significant is the fact that the BJP leadership has tried in Bombay to put its best foot forward, taking up popular issues instead of divisive ones. Although the Ram temple project has not been abandoned and the Mathura and Varanasi mosques are very much part of the official agenda, the main thrust of the BJP today is to catch the Congress at its weakest in terms of vote gathering, namely, the reckless invitation to MNCs to invest even in consumer goods industry, as also the increased indebtedness through large-scale imports and the failure to check the downward trend of the devalued rupee.

The Swadeshi slogan has turned out to be far more catchy than what the BJP leadership at first expected, and certainly much more than what the Opposition had thought it would fetch. Apart from those who have actively participated in the swadeshi jagaran campaign, what is important is that it has struck a responsive chord

even in that section of the public which normally goes with the left and the Centrist parties, all political opponents of the BJP.

The second plus point that has emerged out of the BJP conclave is the projection of Atal Behari Vajpayee as the party's choice for the next prime ministership. Such a projection has quite a lot of significance. For one thing it helps to boost the morale not only of the party members but the party's mass following, injecting into them the belief and the expectation that the BJP has now reached the threshold of power — not the Janata Dal, nor the National Front nor the Left. Secondly, the confusion in the party ranks about dissonance within the leadership is expected to go as Advani himself announced Vajpayee's name, thereby scotching any speculation of rivalry or uncertainty. This also will have a positive impact on the wider public outside the BJP circle. Because Vajpayee's image is that of a near-Congressman, or more precisely, one who is acceptable to the people outside his party.

At two crucial junctures that the BJP has had to face — once in 1992 immediately in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition, and again recently at the height of the Gujarat crisis — it was Vaj-

payee's active intervention that could save the face of the BJP before the wider public. In the first case, Vajpayee helped to break the isolation of the party, and in the second case, his intervention managed to save the party from imminent split in Gujarat.

There is a third advantage that the BJP can gain out of Vajpayee's installation as the prime-minister-in-writing is that this may help at a crucial stage to bring non-BJP parties into a coalition or electoral understanding when the need will come for such understanding. The BJP leadership as much as the Congress leadership, has come to realise that neither of them would be able to muster a majority in the Lok Sabha on its own, and so, it will need the support of other parties, particularly the regional parties, for it to claim majority support in Parliament — without which the President may not care to call it at all to form the government. There is no other leader in the highest echelons of the BJP who commands so much of respect and goodwill as does Vajpayee on his own. With Vajpayee at the helm, the BJP will be in a very good position to muster the maximum support in parliamentary politics.

It will however be incorrect to think that the BJP has

emerged from a *kayakalpa* at its Bombay session. The tensions and differences that beset the party not only in Gujarat, but in Rajasthan and Delhi, as also in Himachal Pradesh and to a lesser extent in Uttar Pradesh, have not been healed up at all. Right in Maharashtra, the party faces dissidence as could be seen by the attack on some of its well-known leaders in the State, voiced from within the party. These are very much there and may flare up any day.

The real test on this score will come for the BJP leadership at the time of ticket distribution for the elections. In fact, this will be the time when the disgruntled and the unscrupulous within any party try to take their revenge. The Congress has faced this affliction acutely in Maharashtra at the time of the recent Assembly elections. There is no doubt this will come into play in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh when the BJP leadership will sit down to choose its candidates for the Lok Sabha poll.

Connected with this is the question of the BJP's future relationship with the Shiv Sena. Until now, the principle by which the BJP could join hands with the Shiv Sena has been that the Shiv Sena will have the first say in the Assembly election list while the BJP will be given prefer-

ence in the Lok Sabha candidate list. Incidentally, this is the very principle that prevails in Tamilnadu between the Congress and the AIADMK since the days of Indira Gandhi's 1971 election. As things stand in Bombay now, the Shiv Sena supreme, Bal Thackeray is getting a larger-than-life projection outshining the BJP to a large measure. It will be quite on the cards if the BJP finds Bal Thackeray demanding more than what the Shiv Sena can normally demand. If tension breaks out over the issue, it is the BJP which will stand to lose, more than the Shiv Sena, which is keeping a *semia-subterranean* channel open with the anti-Pawar group in Maharashtra Congress. By no means, easy going for the BJP leadership.

A major handicap that the BJP leadership has to face — perhaps the most intractable in store for it — is with regard to the Muslim minority. In fact, almost everyone of its political stand — from the common civil code to revision of Article 370 in Kashmir — brings it into direct confrontation not only with the Muslim community but with a large segment of political leadership stretching from the Centre to the Left. Unlike 1969-72 or 1977, the allergy to the BJP on this score is stronger today. That is because of two reasons.

First, ideologically the BJP now takes a position which directly attacks Islam. Secondly, the BJP campaign against Article 370 for Kashmir is interpreted by many sections of Muslim community as an anti-Muslim move, that is, the BJP is doing this just because Kashmir is a Muslim majority State. It is pointed out that though the North-east has also certain special provisions under the Constitution, the BJP does not campaign for their scrapping as it does in the case of Article 370 in Kashmir.

The experience of the 1989-90 has shown the Muslim community that the BJP leadership did not hesitate to bring down the VP Singh Ministry because it took a position that guaranteed protection for the minority community. From Advani's *rathiyatra* in 1990 to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the Muslim community found that it could hardly trust the BJP or its fellow-travelling allies.

The demographic mosaic of India is such that without the support — or at least the benevolent neutrality — of the Muslim community, no national level party can hope to gain substantial number of Lok Sabha seats to ensure its ascendancy to power. Here indeed is the real challenge that faces the BJP leadership today.

The writer is an Editor of 'Mainstream'.

The series FALL OF ERSHAD is held over for tomorrow.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Bank loans

Sir, Very often, we come across news items in the media over a drive to find potential investors and industrialists. Bankers are likewise advised to disburse money now being left idle in bank custody. Industrialists and businessmen are also being advised to make the best use of the opportunity. But it is not understood as to why the government has to request the potential businessmen and industrialists to approach the banks for money for their concerns. It is common knowledge that a person who needs money for his unit will approach the banks, negotiate with their project profiles and will be granted loans by the banks when the terms are acceptable to them. However, the fact is that there are good number of

businessmen who after taking loan from the financial institutions, faced such onslaughts that they not only failed to earn substantial profits, which is so very necessary to make payment of ever increasing cost of production and bills of utility services, besides paying the instalments of loan and interest therefore; but also to survive in the acutely competitive world market.

No loanee is expected to dispose of his personal property to repay the loan burden.

It is accordingly for the authorities to look into the causes of borrowers' difficulties and take pragmatic steps including substantial reduction of the bank rates of interest which might ensure survival of business of the

loanees and save them from running sick and unproductive concerns. Loan terms should also be commensurate to fiscal laws, to save the loanees from utter ruin.

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Phensidyl — is anyone concerned?

Sir, All of us are quite familiar with the term "opium". Yes, it is none other than a drug extracted from the unripe seeds of the opium-poppo. Needless to say that opium is an addictive narcotic. It contains several alkaloids including morphine and codeine. Now let us refresh our memory a bit with some facts about the destructive powers of opium. In the later part of the 19th century, the whole of China was in the grip of this drug. This drug practically paralysed an entire nation. Under the evil influence of opium, China plunged into an abyss of darkness.

However, my purpose here is to discuss how opium-like substance called Phensidyl is destroying the potentials of the youths in Bangladesh. The main ingredient in Phensidyl is codeine, and therefore, it would not be incorrect to say that actually it is opium in a liquid form.

Our political leaders of both the ruling and the opposition parties are so busy with themselves and their petty differences that they hardly notice that our young generation is gradually becoming dependent on drugs. Same goes for the social workers. People are still ignorant of what this drug is doing to this country. Their blindness and deliberate ignorance will surely present drastic consequences in the near future.

Due to lack of proper knowledge, people fail to comprehend the fact that this drug has the power to incapacitate and cripple an entire nation. When eminent economists and social thinkers discuss about or point out the major elements hindering the development

of this country, do they ever think of this drug? No, certainly not. But this drug in the near future will emerge as one of the most significant elements obstructing the development process of this country.

Phensidyl or "Dall" (as it is known among the addicts) is a monster in disguise of a syrup. This monster seems to be determined to destroy our youths.

We talk about development, social evils, progress and prosperity, but do we ever think of eliminating this monster? Do we ever think of those unfortunate boys who are heading towards complete destruction?

We hold discussing, symposiums, in order to promote AIDS awareness among the people, but what have we done so far to inform the people about Phensidyl?

What have we done to divert our youths from falling into the trap of this drug? Often we find in the newspapers that "500 bottles of Phensidyl have been seized",

"600 bottles of Phensidyl confiscated" and the like. What a farce.

Under the noses of the law enforcers, the Phensidyl dens are operating. There are allegedly about 25 Phensidyl dens in Dhaka and they are operating quite safely. My belief is that they will go on operating no matter what happens.

The Phensidyl connection goes high up, higher than one can imagine. Ask yourselves: "Is it possible to eliminate this monster?" I think not. At this juncture the best possible thing to do would be to hold Phensidyl awareness programmes like discussions etc. We will possibly fail to exterminate this drug but we can at least disseminate information about this drug which in the long run will create awareness among the young generation.

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