

Begs Clarification

While the 15 by-elections, by and large, passed off well enough, there was a dangling downside to them coming to a glaring light after 48 hours of the staging of the process. The misgivings are confined to the voting in Mirsharai constituency (Chittagong-1) and Laxmipur-2 constituency, let alone an actual postponement of polling at a centre in Rangpur-5. These arise not merely out of a BNP litany of charges but also allegations made by the ruling party insofar as the polling in Laxmipur-2 constituency was concerned. Local leaders of both AL and BNP faulted the Laxmipur administration for failing to take action against those preventing their respective voters from casting their ballots.

Reports suggested that in some cases magistrates on mobile duty or law enforcing personnel had to come in aid of the voters, women voters in particular, amidst intimidation by interested quarters, to enable them to vote. False voters were also caught red-handed but were eventually let off. Empty interior of some centres in between certain hours may lend itself to an explanation that voters had finished voting early accounting for that deserted look. But if the complaint is about the first hours themselves, regardless of the party which has made it, surely it deserves to be gone into for the sake of setting the records straight. The audience, mind you, is the people here.

When such was the string of incidents, Chief Election Commissioner, Mohammad Abu Hena, after observing polling in four of the 15 constituencies, made an announcement in the evening that the voting was being free, fair and transparent. It was obviously a sweeping and premature statement by him in the light of what followed.

We are neither interested in exaggerations or understatements about the conduct of the poll, our sole objective is to ensure that the polls were not only held freely and fairly but were also seen by the people to have been so. This is something we had urged through this column on the poll-day and are doing it again in the knowledge that things went wrong in some places.

Let the allegations be taken up centre by centre and put at rest by nothing short of corrective actions where necessary. So long as misgivings dwell in the public mind about polling even in a single constituency, there will be a blot on the electoral process.

Healthcare

The government has plans to integrate the public and private sector healthcare facilities in a new health policy to be presented to the country before long. Given the deplorable condition of government-run hospitals and overcommercialisation of and lack of quality control in the private healthcare service, they obviously need to be brought into a symbiotic relationship. Whether the move towards integration will bring about the required improvement in the health sector is, however, something that time alone can tell. How the intricacies of integration are taken care of, will determine, to a large extent, the quality of medicare in the country.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina underscored the need for a humanitarian attitude on the part of the people involved in medical services. In a free-market economy, contrary to the common impression, the humanitarian angle has a pragmatic implication in that it can add to the competitiveness of their services. Those who are gifted with humane quality will serve the ailing humanity any way — without being goaded. But there ought to be new converts to the humanitarian concept in a free market system where either you give money's worth through the quality of your service or perish. So professionalism must be the medical practitioners' motto.

The prime minister's concern for a radical improvement in the health services will be vindicated if the health sector has more budgetary support year after year during her tenure. The practice almost the world over today is to make the medical service at the public hospitals costly for patients. Growing opposition to healthcare benefits and subsidies for government hospitals has frustrated moves by governments even in rich countries to ensure cheap medical services for the poor. In our country we may not encounter a strong domestic opposition but donors and international agencies may not like the idea of subsidising medical services here.

Let the affluent in our society take initiatives like that of late Dr Ibrahim — the founder of BIRDEM — to provide quality treatment for the poor at a nominal cost.

Export Target

Year by year the export target is upped. This benefits an export-led growth strategy. But it increases the burden of performance materialisable only by un inhibited productivity, steady finishing-line dynamism and rapid flow of orders from overseas.

This year's target is set at 4,380 million US dollars, a good 21 per cent upswing in earnings over the level of fiscal 1995-96. Hopes are basically pinned on political peace, a fact that has been amply illustrated by a markedly increased export earning in the trouble-free month of July.

We are relying on agricultural products and readymade garments to meet the new export earning target. Both these areas had proved extremely vulnerable last year to the vagaries of a deep-seated political stalemate. The RMG sector, despite all the battering it had taken, still contributed to more than 70 per cent of the total export earnings with 1.94 billion US dollars made in place of the targeted 2 billion dollars. This year the target for the RMG sector is 2,300 million dollars.

The exporters have fiscal incentives in the new budget and their competitiveness should be bolstered by the latest round of devaluation of Taka, the third since July.

Indo-Bangladesh Relations: Myths and Realities

In the process of Baudhisation of history one of the first victims was Indo-Bangladesh relationships. Everything was done to keep Indo-phobia alive not with a view to promoting our national interest but only as a cheap political slogan to mislead the people of the country.

BANGLADESH revolution was unique in many ways. The number of people killed in the time-span of nine months, 10 million refugees sheltered in by neighbouring India, a guerrilla war fought against an army equipped with most modern weapons, is all unprecedented in human history. What is not unique is the support given by India to our valiant freedom fighters. Mao Tse Tung's success was largely due to the World War II and the opportunities he had provided. Marshall Tito and Ho Chi Minh's liberation of Yugoslavia and Albania was facilitated by the German defeat at the hands of the Russians. American pressure on Holland and the moral support of international community helped Indonesia to gain independence. Dien Bien Phu was possible because of material support from China. The Vietnamese victory was due to the uninterrupted flow of weapons and military hardware from the USSR and China into North Vietnam. In contrast to the military experiences of those countries what was unique in the Bangladeshi theatre was the sacrifice of the lives of 13,000 Indian troops in the battle for Bangladesh. The green fields of Bengal and the clear waters of our rivers bled crimson with the sacred blood of our own freedom fighters and that of the friendly forces.

In a short period following our liberation, we had 10 million refugees rehabilitated, a near-prostrate economy put on track, an administrative machinery mobilised, and recognition of most of the UN member-states obtained. We became member of the UN agencies, secured Commonwealth membership, membership of the NAM, OIC, and the United Nations on September 17, 1974. This was possible because of the spontaneous support we received from our friendly countries, and particularly from neighbouring India. We even made a phenomenal success in GDP growth.

over 9 per cent in the first three-and-a-half years, all the other constraints notwithstanding. Unfortunately, things changed following the tragic events of August 15, 1975. Quarter century on, it is apparent that what happened on that fateful night was not an isolated effort or an action of a group of lunatics: August 15 was the result of a conspiracy hatched by the defeated forces of 1971, actively supported by an international network of anti-Bangladesh elements.

In these past 21 years while fundamentalist politics was encouraged in Bangladesh and anti-India bogey was ruthlessly used as a political handle to suppress the forces of Bengali nationalism, the spirit of the War of Liberation was condemned and a massive effort was made through cool calculation to distort our history.

In the process of Baudhisation of history one of the first victims was Indo-Bangladesh relationships. Everything was done to keep Indo-phobia alive not with a view to promoting our national interest but only as a cheap political slogan to mislead the people of the country. As a direct consequence of the deterioration of the bilateral relationship the issue of Ganges water-sharing was perhaps the first victim. Late president Ziaur Rahman raised it in the UNGA in 1976. Then Egyptian PR in New York Ismet Meguid, later foreign minister and now Arab League Secretary-General, pleaded with both Bangladesh and India to resolve this issue bilaterally. Begum Zia, as Bangladesh prime minister, made a broadside against India on the floor of the General Assembly in 1993. She, however, made one big blunder; the issue was not even inscribed in the agenda of the General Assembly on Farakka in 1994.

debated. The result was predictable. It withered on the vine as a political stunt. What was most distressing was that throughout the five-year rule of Begum Zia no serious effort was made towards finding a solution to the problem.

On August 10, in a seminar organised by BUP at a local hotel, on the sharing of the Ganges waters, a reasonably well-researched paper authored by the chairman of BUP and head of Geography Department was read out. In my brief intervention at the seminar, I attempted to put things in perspective: lack of political commitment was responsible for the present

This seminar threw up a number of important conclusions, two of them are worth quoting. One participant termed South Asians 'as the most suicidal maniacs today on the planet', another expert said, 'North East of South Asia is the world's poorest swathe of poverty. We must collaborate to get out of the situation.' I K Gujral agreed with the conclusion. Soft-spoken and unassuming, Gujral's contribution was most penetrating and meaningful. It was *ex-cathedra* and not *ex parte*. He was critical of his own governments for not reaching out to Bangladesh. His recent interview with *The Daily Star* editor

equitable solution. Along with the Ganges waters agreement, a polemics-free relationship could be helpful to both of us. In economic field, factors endowment would be an effective tool insofar as promoting our economic relationship is concerned. To begin with, India can reduce her tariff from the present 50 per cent to 25 per cent as Bangladesh has already effected. Today Bangladesh imports Indian goods worth 2 billion dollars. Whereas our export is a paltry sum of 3 million. Reduced tariff by India would help Bangladesh to improve our export basket. As a matter of fact, India would do well by making a non-reciprocal gesture, if necessary, on Farakka problem. It may be difficult but then a man with vision like Gujral should not fail.

Both Europe and Asia have been victims of foreign and alien aggression: Huns in the 5th, Saracens in the 8th, Magyars in the 9th, Mongols in the 13th and Turks in the 14th went to West Europe. Attracted to the oriental lure were the Aryans, the Huns, Mongols, Afghans, the Portuguese, the French and the British.

What we need today is vision — ability to look to the future. Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Devi Gawde would be remembered by posterity if they could direct their two Foreign Ministers, both tested leaders in their respective countries, to show courage and sagacity in finding an equitable solution of Ganges water-sharing, and take us to the threshold of 21st century. Other issues like transit etc., should be totally delinked and discussed only on their economic merits.

India has reportedly just opened the door ajar to Nepal. She could take another big step forward by opening completely the window of opportunity, the window of magic casement, in creating the kind of confidence that is so much needed, to do justice to the hallowed memory of those who laid down their lives to help us attain our liberation.

Time has now arrived. And we must act.

ENCHIRIDION



Walidur Rahman

Mahfuz Anam almost echoes in extenso idea for idea on various issues affecting our relations.

With foreign minister Gujral in the capital, one can expect that he will try in helping the two countries in confidence-building. A definitive commitment by Gujral could pave the way. Given the good will that exists between the two governments a reasonable agreement on the amount of water to be discharged for almost 30-day-long period would not be an impossible task. West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's remarks could also be helpful.

The water that is used by upstream provinces like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has to be nationalised. Many Indian thinkers and columnists also recognise the necessity of an

equitable solution.

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As regards the SADF, its creation is the result of merger of two funds — SAARC Fund for Regional Projects and SAARC Regional Fund. Bangladesh participated in five of the 13 projects recommended by the SAARC Fund for Regional Projects. Even if SAARC is yet to achieve any economic breakthrough, the promise is there. Now that the fund has come up, the member-countries should attach enough importance to contributing their shares regularly.

discussions of bilateral and regional problems must not be allowed to remain closed. As for economic cooperation, a genuine spirit for upholding the regional interest must supersede all other considerations. One does not have to look for instances of the benefit of such a spirit. The European Community, the ASEAN and other regional blocs have already shown the way. Unless the bigger and more advanced members appreciate the fact that in the long-run collective economic benefit would depend on each member's prosperity, otherwise all our exercises would degenerate into a mere formalism.

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In no circumstances should the fund be regulated to secondary importance. Our past experience with a number of SARC initiatives has not been very happy. Let the economic initiative, particularly the one serving multilateral interests within the forum, realise its full potential. Regional collaboration for raising industrial productivity is most welcome because that way the member-countries get the best deal possible among themselves.

SADF: Outcome Of SAARC and SAPTA

by Anu Mahmud

Even if SAARC is yet to achieve any economic breakthrough, the promise is there. Now that the fund has come up, the member-countries should attach enough importance to contributing their shares regularly.

THE South Asian Development Fund (SADF), already opened its doors, is aiming to promote projects which will benefit more than one member countries of the seven-nation SAARC. The establishment of the regional fund was officially announced at the first meeting of the SADF governing board which was held in Dhaka.

The SADF has identified 13 projects including five from Bangladesh on different sectors.

The SADF has endorsed the establishment of three windows SADF through the merger of SAARC fund for regional projects and the SAARC regional fund.

The three windows of the SADF are: 1 window for identification and Development of projects, 2 window for Institutional and Human Resources Development projects and 3 window for Social and Infrastructure Development projects.

The member-countries of SADF donated a total of 5 million US dollars as the core capital of the fund. The country wise breakup is: Bangladesh 576,500 dollars, Bhutan 250,000 dollars, India 1,605,000 dollars, Maldives 250,000 dollars, Nepal 567,500 dollars, Pakistan 1,192,500 dollars and Sri Lanka 567,500 dollars.

The 18 per cent of the fund has been spent to carry out feasibility study on the identified

member-state to lead the fund for two years and that the Fund's headquarters will be located at the ICB head office in Dhaka.

Some would say that the impact of creation of the SAARC is limited to football and South Asian games. Indeed it took quite some time for the SAARC partners to explore the vast economic possibilities of this regional grouping. Economic benefit did not become apparent immediately. It was thought that the member-states had mutually competitive rather than complimentary economies and for that reason SAARC's economic prospects were considered.

The possibilities of trade expansion through regional cooperation have begun to be realised, even if belatedly, and a landmark in this direction was SAARC's Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAFTA) launched in April 1993. SAFTA which sought to give economic teeth to the regional group aimed at liberalisation of intra-SAARC trade through step-by-step approach. A distinctive feature of SAFTA was that it enabled the least developed member-states: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal to receive trade concessions without being obliged to reciprocate in full measure, and also incorporated certain measures to help the least developed members to expand their exports by enhancing production

capacity and industrial growth.

A built-in limitation of SAARC is that its members are disparate in size, strengths and resources. This is where the comparison with ASEAN is not valid. The SAARC is yet to come of age for many reasons. It is yet to become the kind of international forum or organisation it was expected to be. Its smaller member states are yet to be convinced of the kind of future of their regional organisation that they would like to have. Not that one can say that it has failed as a regional organisation. The fact is, it has not been able to achieve the measure of success it could. Some member-countries of the SAARC have tried in vain to say that the organisation should be turned into a forum where all members could discuss all matters of their mutual concern, including the bilateral ones. One can say that restriction on addressing the contentious bilateral issues at the SAARC forum is not ideal. There are many more international forum in today's world like this seven-nation regional forum, where members discuss almost anything under the sun. There is no reason why SAARC cannot be like that. More so, because this is necessary to make the forum more effective and mutually beneficial.

Not only the smaller SAARC member-states, but now experts and analysts of international eminence and stature have begun to articulate their reservations and doubts about the future of this regional forum. Professor Srinivasan of the Yale University of USA who has visited Bangladesh, expressed his doubt about the success of the SAARC without India paying more attention to the sensitive issues of the smaller neighbouring countries. This is obvious because India has to pay a vital and commutative role for establishing peace and stability in this region which are essential for a speedy economic growth.

Professor Srinivasan is also of the view, and rightly so, that restriction on addressing the contentious bilateral issues at the forum should go and India should not stand in the way of removing this shortcoming of the SAARC. A proponent of global trade liberalisation that he is, Professor Srinivasan also has reservations about the effectiveness and success of SAPTA, one of the principal agreements of the SAARC. The Yale Professor did not mince his words in saying that he was not enthusiastic about SAPTA. There has to be a coordinated liberalisation of trade among the member countries. Commitment to liberalisation and open market, it has been seen, is not enough especially as and when one takes into consideration the hospitality factor.

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