

Politics of 'Proposing and Opposing' Must End

-Saifur Rahman

Interviewed by Inam Ahmed

The Daily Star (DS): Recently in a newspaper interview you suggested that the four major political parties should stop conventional politics for the next three to four years and work together to build the country. What did you mean by this?

Saifur Rahman (SR): What I meant was that, in our country, all political parties want to make short term political gains at the expense of medium and long term economic progress. When a political party comes to power, its main target becomes the next election. For that, they avoid taking hard and unpopular decisions and carry out the much-needed reforms which harm the vested groups. When populist politics and getting votes become the overriding concerns, it is difficult to implement hard-nosed decisions. The common perception is that people will not vote for a party if it goes for real reforms and takes harsh decisions like eliminating so-called system loss, cutting excess manpower empowering the poor, etc. Political parties do not want to antagonise the powerful few who would be hurt which on the other hand would benefit millions. Even worse, I am saying it from my experience, politicians make deals with the vested quarters like trade unions and associations to gain support, that further stalls reforms. That is exactly how politics is run today. It is not possible to bring discipline in national life because of short term political expediency.

After working 11 years as a minister of finance, planning and commerce, my conclusion is that unless politics of expediency is replaced by politics of national interest, Bangladesh cannot make progress. That is why I want major political parties should refrain from conventional politics for the next three to four years and work together to build the nation. The present political culture of proposing by one party and opposing by another regardless of the issue, must be stopped if we are to make real progress.

DS: Was it the politics of 'proposing and opposing' which deterred you from carrying out the much-needed reforms?

SR: I faced strong internal and external opposition to my reform agenda. When we went for freeing trade, the minister concerned complained to the prime minister that the market was being opened up to foreign goods and that would be bad for us. The former prime minister was well-disposed toward reforms in the beginning and had given me strong support. But she was gradually overwhelmed by other cabinet colleagues. Reforms took the worst beating after the Dhaka Mayoral election.

The worst period of me as the finance minister was when BNP government lost the mayoral elections in Dhaka and Chittagong. BNP could have turned this defeat into something positive by saying that it had set a fine example of BNP's commitment toward democracy and fairness in election. The failure in the city corpo-

Former Finance Minister, Saifur Rahman, has gained the admiration of both friends and foes for speaking out his mind. While a minister, some of his most critical remarks were directed at his own government for failing to carry forward the reforms that he had so boldly pushed. Never known to mince his words Saifur Rahman, who had been our longest serving finance minister - covering 11 years - has always been an uncompromising advocate of reforms, privatisation, opening our market, and of tough actions against the loss making state-owned enterprises.

Now in the opposition, he has surprised everybody by suggesting that our major political parties should stop traditional politics and work together to develop the country. In the following interview with The Daily Star Rahman expresses his frustrations at the failure of political parties to see beyond the next election, and urges all to rise to the needs of the changing world order.

ration election was blamed on me and my reforms agenda. I had to face the prime minister and other ministers and senior BNP functionaries who were concerned with Chittagong mayoral election process. They were bitterly critical of the reforms which they felt cost BNP mayoral election victory. Following the Dhaka and Chittagong elections, reforms were substantially stalled. As a result we failed to fulfil the conditions for jute sector reform programme, we did not get the second chance of the JSAC.

The Haifa Textile Mills which was to be sold as a part of the jute sector reform process, and though it fetched a good price in tender bids, the final decision to sell was never taken for fear of political backlash.

DS: What, in your opinion, should the new government do to circumvent this tradition of populist politics?

SR: Nothing fundamental can be done unless the government and the opposition cooperate. I am doubtful about the

fore the new government must act quickly on the reform issues.

DS: How do you evaluate the performance of AL government so far?

SR: Now is the right time for Sheikh Hasina to take the tough economic decisions. But she is opening too many unnecessary fronts. I am convinced that politics of revenge and witch hunting will not pay. Corruptions should be dealt through due process of law. There is a department to look into corruption cases. Politically-motivated witch hunting is not a way to eliminate corruption. It will only vitiate the political goodwill and understanding, create bitterness and hatred. People in Bangladesh are historically opposition-minded. So, government is always at a disadvantage. AL should know that, because it benefited from the tradition. Now that tradition will work in BNP's favour. So Sheikh Hasina should be careful.

I do not see much economic

opposing the government with strikes and hartals. AL crippled the country in the past. Now we may end up doing the same, just to oppose. Sadly enough, for the political parties, elections have become predominant factors and all other factors especially the economy and social issues, are subordinated to political considerations. If the objective of politics is just to stay in power, then I think this politics is meaningless and cannot deliver any good to the society.

DS: How do you look at BNP's losing the election?

SR: People did not reject BNP in the election; looking at the ministerial casualties, it is the cabinet of the BNP government that was rejected. If BNP had bagged those 26 lost seats of cabinet members, it would have been in a position to form the government. If the former cabinet members performed better, we would have been in power. So I repeat, BNP did not lose, it is the BNP cabinet, of which I was a part, that lost. Besides, we continue to maintain that BNP did not get a fair and neutral deal in the election process.

DS: You are stressing on a common approach to tackle the problems facing the country. How do you think this can be achieved?

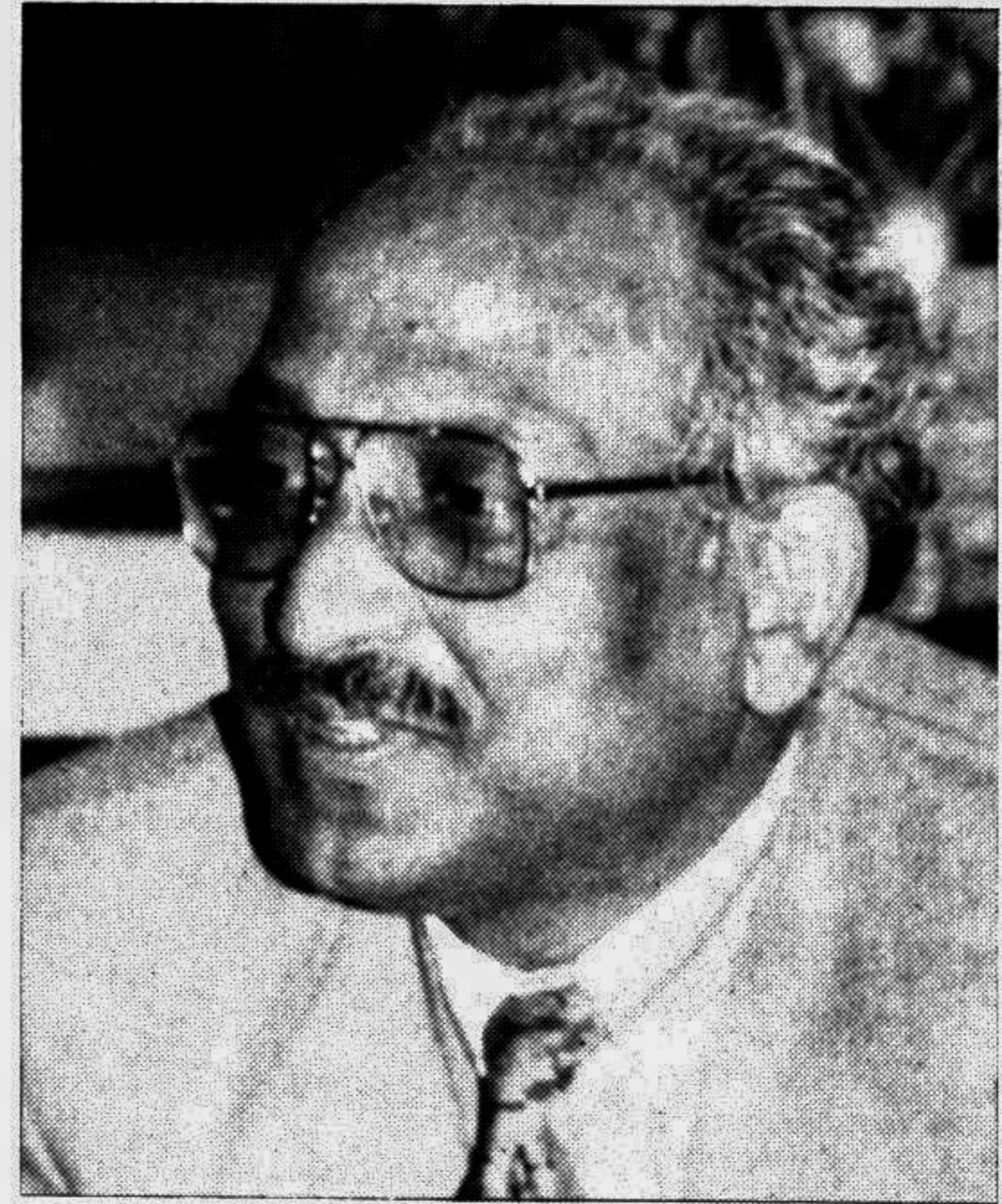
SR: The government should create a congenial and hospitable political environment and identify the major difficult issues like what to do in sectors e.i. energy, gas, water, railway etc. and then sit with the opposition parties on these decisive issues and exchange views with the leaders for reaching a consensus. The government can prepare working papers on the issues and send these to the political parties for discussion. If necessary there can be special sessions of the parliament where the discussions can be held. In such an issue there should not be any whip and would be totally free from the party whips' controlling mechanism. Then the MPs would be able to speak out whatever they feel irrespective of their party lines.

If such attempts are taken, BNP is most likely to participate in such discussions because if it does not, it will be put in a defensive position. But such discussions must be held in a hospitable political environment free from revenge and recriminations. If AL calls us to the dialogue and at the same time arrests our leaders or their relatives, this will make the situation hostile for such dis-

ussions. Discussions must be held in an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence. If AL takes a positive approach, and does it sincerely, I am sure BNP will be forced by circumstances to respond.

DS: But how do you change the political psyche?

SR: This is a major challenge for all politicians. We have to give a new direction to our political culture, otherwise we will not be able to solve our national problem. If every decision is opposed, especially those that deal with our foreign relations, then the government can never move forward. Let me give you a latest example. We have a number of vital issues to settle with India. We must decide on them keeping our national interest in mind. But we must also see that we arrive at a fair, equitable solution which is essential with economic and commercial logic in the context of the global trading and in-



vestment environment.

Paradoxically, whenever such issues come up for discussion at ministerial level, we duck the issue because quite often what is rational and logical get overwhelmed by passion of political over sensitivities. Both the countries are destined

to live together, and must do so in peace and harmony and yet, we fail to take rational decisions, which are very much in our national interest, because of domestic politics.

As you know we import many things from India including coal. This we do because of

competitive advantages. Mind you coal spoils our environment and also leads our roads and bridges to wear and tear and sometimes to damages when heavy trucks are used to bring it. Yet the proposition to explore the possibility of purchasing electricity from India has become highly politicised.

Communist Russia did not hesitate to export gas to capitalist Europe. Thailand is purchasing electricity from Laos for which Asian Development Bank has recently given 50 million US dollars. Such deals are not endangering the sovereignty of the buyer and seller countries. Yet any mention of such a deal with India, to meet our short term power shortage, becomes such a politically charged issue that it is impossible to hold a rational discussion on it. Reasons are to be found in the history and geography of our two countries and a kind of confidence gap between the two peoples.

India also has not helped in this matter by its earlier refusal to give Bangladesh and Nepal on-land transit facilities when Bangladesh requested for it. In such matters, countries of this subcontinent are driven more by hearts and less by heads.

DS: So, to what do you attribute such a political situation?

SR: To our tradition of politics of 'proposing and opposing' without understanding the issues. I wonder how long nations of this subcontinent can ignore economic and investment logic in the globalised free market economy and be enslaved by historical hangers.

DS: Thank you for your time. SR: Thank you.

Population Question-marks Overhang Asia's Economic Boom

by Juan L Mercado

TWO 'huge population question-marks' overhang the Philippines and Asia as a whole, that logs in 266 births a minute, crested the 5.77 billion marker middle of this year.

The demographic 'question marks' are China and India, says the Population Reference Bureau in a note to its 1996 World Population Data sheet.

China in mid-1996 had an estimated 1.21 billion people. Roughly, one in four out of every living person today is Chinese. Though dictatorial policies dragged down fertility to 1.8 children per woman.

But 'if democratic processes replace the central authoritarian government (in China),' the Washington-based think-tank asks, will the birth rate - now only 1.8 children per woman - spurt up 'in this traditional, still largely rural society'?

For its part, India accounts for 94.9 million people. Despite a modest fertility decline, India's already huge population base still adds on the equivalent of one Chile yearly. Indian women today average

3.4 children each - partly a result of the three-decade programme to pitch for smaller families. But a plateau in fertility may now have been reached.

In the years ahead, population increases - despite lower fertility in countries like Thailand or Argentina - will be crammed into two sharply contrasting regions: impoverished Africa and Asia of the '1990's economic miracle.'

Within this skewed setting, developing countries like the Philippines account for 80 per cent of the surge in people, notes the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). By mid-1996, there were an estimated 72 million Filipinos - and this could balloon to 113.5 million in year 2025.

Improved health services, better nutrition, growth in income helped bring down death rates - to about 99 per minute worldwide, UNFPA figures further indicate.

This means birth rates, in developing countries, are about twice the level needed, in demographers' jargon, to 'stabilise' population, i.e., births

achieve parity with deaths. Last year alone, population increases added up to the equivalent of three Canadas. At that rate, 'world population could top 10 billion, by the middle of the next century, before gradually leveling off,' adds the new report: World Resources 1996-97.

People, of course, remain the most crucial of all assets. And all major conferences - from Rio on environment to Rome on nutrition and Beijing on women - agree: All have a human right to life, adequate food, shelter and education.

But sheer numbers complicate the task of securing these rights. The strain is reflected in unprecedented pressure on resources. Critical areas include: Freshwater Supplies: Between 1940 and 1990, withdrawals from lakes, rivers, aquifers multiplied by a factor of four. By the year 2050, one out of every five persons would live in water-short nations.

Food Security: Cropland losses, erosion, agronomic ceilings are interlocking, says the Food and Agriculture Organisa-

tion. By 2010, the 'paramount food security problem' will be consumption levels, in many countries, will remain totally inadequate for good nutrition.

Deteriorating Ecosystems: The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) cites a wide range of critical ecosystems at risk. Six out of every 10 persons live within 100-kilometer wide corridors along coasts. Pollution and over-exploitation are draining these systems beyond sustainable levels, along with forests and fishing areas.

'Fast experience has shown the need to shift away from centralized bureaucracies and towards more flexible community-oriented strategies,' the World Resources report argues. 'All of the policies need effective governance.'

Parallel to this would be the second essential track: Slowing down population growth. This would help buy elbow room to cope with problems that threaten to destroy the very capacity to achieve humane standards of living in the early 21st century. DEPTnews

The Daily Star Entertainment Guide

Saturday 28th September (All programmes are in local time. There may be changes in group programmes.)

BTV

3:00pm Opening Announcement Al-Quran Programme Summary 3:10 Recitation from the Tripitak 3:15 Movie of the Week 4:00 News in Bangla 5:00 News in Bangla 5:25 Ban-shori: Folk Songs 6:00pm News in Bangla 6:05 Shamadhar 6:30 Moner Mukure 7:00 News in English 8:00 News in Bangla 8:30 Mati-o-Manush. Programme based on Agricultural Development 8:30 Anirbad 10:00 News in English 10:30 Shashatatha: Health Programme 10:35 Drama Series: Dynasty 11:30 News in Bangla 11:35 Tomorrow's programme summary 11:40 Close down

BBC

6:00am BBC World News 6:20 The Last Days of The Wall 7:00 BBC World News 7:10 Newsnight 8:00 BBC World News 8:20 Window On Europe 9:00 BBC World Headlines 9:05 Correspondent 10:00 BBC World News 10:20 Living On The Edge 11:00 BBC World News 11:20 Window On Europe 12:00noon BBC World Headlines 12:05 Heart Of The Matter 1:00 BBC World Headlines 1:05 White Heat 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Tomorrow's World 3:00 BBC World News 3:30 Time Out: The Travel Show 4:00 BBC World Headlines 4:05 Horizon 5:00 BBC World News 5:20 The Last Days Of The Wall 5:50 Earth Report 6:00pm BBC World Headlines 6:05 Time-watch 7:00 BBC World News 7:20 This Week 8:00 BBC World News 8:30 Time Out: Film '96 9:00 BBC World Headlines 9:05 Correspondent 10:00 BBC World News 10:30 Time Out: The Clothes Show 11:00 BBC World News 11:20 This Week 12:00am BBC World News 12:20 Living On The Edge 1:00 BBC World Headlines 1:05 Horizon 2:00 BBC World News 2:30 Time Out: Top Gear 3:00 BBC World News 3:25 Window On Europe 4:00 BBC World News 4:25 This Week 5:00 BBC World News 5:20 Living On The Edge



Baywatch on Star Plus Tonight at 8:30

CHANNEL V

6:00am Frame by Frame 7:00 Rewind VJ Sophia 8:00 Frame by Frame 8:30 Asian Top 20 VJ Trey 10:30 Big Bang Weekend VJ Alessandra 12:30 Billboard VJ Countdown 2:30 The Ride VJ Trey 3:30 Rewind VJ Sophia 4:30 House Of Noise VJ Luke 5:30 [V] 1's 6:00pm Classic Rock 7:00 Top of the Pops 8:00 BPL Oye! 9:00 The Ticket 9:30 Palmolive Extra 10:00 Time Pass 10:30 Rewind 11:00 V Spot 12:00am Big Bang VJ Alessandra 12:30 The Ticket 1:00 Over The Edge VJ Sophia 2:00 Music Update Tokyo 2:30 The Ride VJ Trey 3:30 Big Bang VJ Alessandra 4:30 V Spot

STAR PLUS

6:30am Voltron 7:00 Kids Movie: Inhumanoid 8:30 Count Duckula 9:00 Sabar Rider & The Star Sheriff 9:30 Zoolite With Jack Hanna 10:00 Kalls & Dog 10:30 Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea 11:30 The Wild Wild West 12:30 Movie: The Flying Deuces 2:30 ETV 3:00

sports World 5:30 Thai Kickboxing Highlights

STAR MOVIES

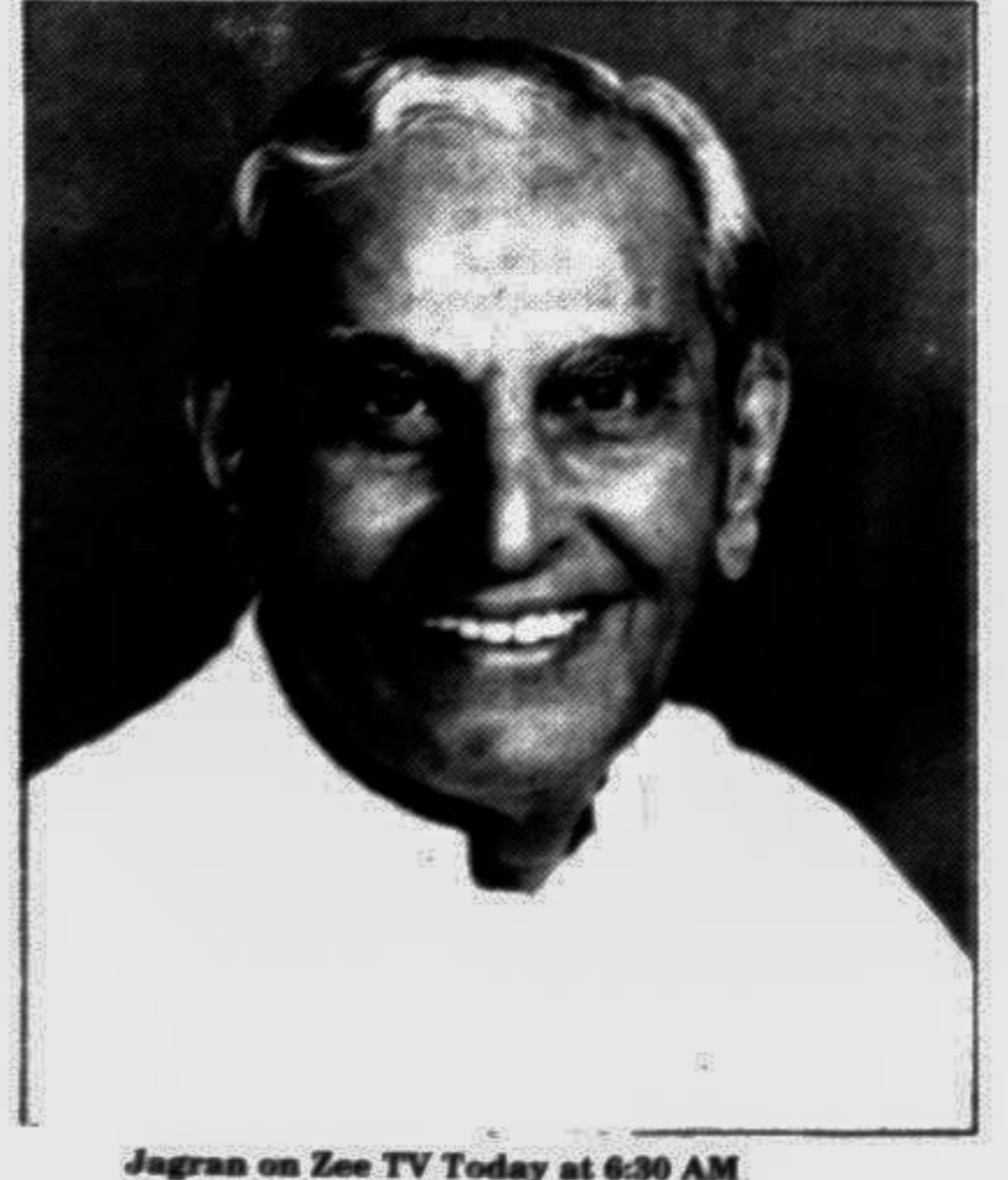
7:30am Western: The Garden of Evil (Arabic Subtitles) 9:30 Comedy Nurses on the Line 15 (Arabic Subtitles) 11:30 Family Frengly: The Last Rainforest PG (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Comedy: The Check is in the Mail 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 3:30 Action: Tom Clancy's Op Center Part 1 (Hindi Subtitles) 5:30 Action: Tom Clancy's Op Center Part 2 (Hindi Subtitles) 7:30 Comedy: Father and Scout 12 (Hindi Subtitles) 9:00 The Preview 9:30 Globetrotting Moscow Gorky Park 18 (Hindi Subtitles) 11:30 After Dark Dressed To Kill 18 (Hindi Subtitles) 1:30 Comedy: Madhouse 15 (Hindi Subtitles) 3:30 After Dark: The Last Seduction 18 (Hindi Subtitles) 5:30 Thriller Pacific Heights 18 (Hindi Subtitles)

ZEE TV

5:30 Surtal 6:00 The News 6:30 Jagran 7:00 ZED 8:30 All Out For No Loss 9:00 Bourmita Quiz Contest 9:30 Suno Bhai Sadhu 10:00 Ad Mad Show 10:30 Gaane Anjaane 11:00

STAR SPORTS

6:30am Australian Football League Highlights 7:30 Sports India 8:30 World Wrestling Federation Raw 9:30 NBA-inside Stuff 10:00 Gillette World Sports Special 10:30 The Asian Football Show 11:00 Britannic Assurance Championship Day 3 via Sky Sports Cut to 6 hours 5:30 Futbol Mundial 6:00pm Inside PGA Tour 6:30 Cricket World 7:00 NBA Fantastic 7:30 Marlboro League HL 8:30 1996 Omega Tour Highlights 9:00 1996 Singer World Series India vs Sri Lanka Highlights 1:00 NBA Fantastic 1:30 World Cup Classics 1996 France v Brazil 4:00 Australian Football League Highlights 5:00 Water-



Jagran on Zee TV Today at 6:30 AM

PTV

8:00am Tilawat Aur Tarjuma/Hamd/Naat 8:20 Cartoon 8:30 Khabran 8:45 Visitors Book 9:10 Phool Khushboo 9:25 Dastarkhwan 9:40 Mehman 10:05 Aap Ki Anwar Maqsood 10:30 English Film: Tarzan 10:55 Milli Naghma

EL TV

00:30 Mein Nasha Mein Hoon 01:30 Bacche Man Ka 02:30 Ched Chad 03:30 Devotional 04:30 Tarane 05:30 Mein Nasha Mein Hoon 06:30 Bacche Man Ka 07:30 Ched Chad 08:30 Devotional 09:30 Tarane 10:30 Dear El 11:00 Ortem Hit Thi Hit Hai 11:30 Karz 12:00 Teen Do Paanch 12:30 Fauji 01:00 Hit Pairs 02:00 Rajesh Khanna Special 3:00 V3+ 3:30 Anjabi 4:30 Nukkad 5:00 Kamaal Combination 05:30 Mein Nasha Mein Hoon 6:30 Sharmi

SONY ET

8:30am Kuch Dil Ne Kaha 9:00 Yaadon Ki Baar 9:30 Cine Matinee-Hindi Feature Film 12:30 Chamatkar 1:00 Siddhi 1:30 Kaash 2:00 Sunday Ki Sunday 2:30 The Nileep Rasoi Club Film : Ogo Suncho 1:00 Nirjan Dupure Premier Gaan (Magazine) 1:30 Njer Gaan Dekha 2:00 Prathingsha 2:30 Bandhu Chile Bhalo 3:00 Kemon Aachen 3:30 Comedy Quiz 4:35 Movie Club Film : iswar Parameswar 5:00 Jishu 5:30 Njer Gaan Dekha 6:00 Nirjan Dupure Premier Gaan 6:30

DD 7

10:30 Janmadin 10:35 Movie Club Film : Sister 1:00 Movie Club Film : Ogo Suncho 1:00 Nirjan Dupure Premier Gaan (Magazine) 1:30 Njer Gaan Dekha 2:00 Prathingsha 2:30 Bandhu Chile Bhalo 3:00 Kemon Aachen 3:30 Comedy Quiz 4:35 Movie Club Film : iswar Parameswar 5:00 Jishu 5:30 Njer Gaan Dekha 6:00 Nirjan Dupure Premier Gaan 6:30

ZEE CINEMA

06:30 Tarana 08:00 Film : Jeene Ki Rahu 10:45 Off Screen 11:15 Film : Samunder 02:00 Ikk Pe Ikk 02:30 Film : Ujan 5:15 Songs 06:00 Ganga Ki Lahu 08:45 Box Office 09:30 Farz 12:15 Trailers 12:30 Film : John Jani Janardan 03:15 Songs 03:45 Film : Do Raha

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