

Hasina-Gowda Talks

The Indian Prime Minister Deve Gowda came to a warm welcome to Dhaka yesterday, and every enthusiastic hand waving on both sides of the street that he got, he deserved.

The official talks between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Indian counterpart, covered a wide range of issues and in most of them reached some important decisions.

We are happy at the reduction of tariff on 500 additional export items which will be effective from 1 March '97. This will give us wider access to Indian market, which must further widen in the coming months if India wants to really help expand our production base.

The most important outcome of the talks is definitely the pushing forward of the idea of a sub-regional group with Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Bhutan. There is something almost natural about this group which has the potential of becoming a dynamic economic growth area.

Better Kept above Politics

The two-day national seminar on the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) theme encompassing Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Railway has proved to be a massive success. The discussion meet of divergent expert and political interest-groups, organised by the ESCAP and the Centre for Policy Dialogue, has led us to a new threshold of grasping the span, linkages and utility of a fairly straight-forward cross-boundary Asian endeavour.

The potential for a bipartisan consensus on Asian Highway exists in a much deeper and wider sense than indicated by the participation of BNP leaders Saifur Rahman and Morshed Khan in the seminar; for, it is the government of Begum Khaleda Zia which had approved the route for Asian Highway through Bangladesh in August '95.

The full realisation of Bangladesh's economic potential depends upon making use of its strategic endowment as a bridge-head between South and South East Asia.

Carrying the political baggage of suspicion and mistrust into the crucial phase of finalising the routes of the Asian Highway will be tantamount to languishing in the global economic backwaters. Can we afford this, especially at the turn of the century? The project should be kept above politics.

Fire-buttons all over

A popular shopping corner for student multitudes on a look-out for buying old books or photographing them on the cheap looks an extra bit more scrawny today than usual — thanks to an early morning blaze on Sunday. The Nilkhet hub of old books gone mostly flaccid and soiled, more from repeat handling than from age, is poorer by the gutting of as many as 25 shops which courted the disaster with its tinder-box like merchandise.

As if that was not enough of an open-arm invitation to fire, those ill-fated shops were made of the inflammable hard-boards and the easily heating corrugated iron-sheets.

Given the way power connections have been taken into that sardine packed shopping area mostly unauthorisedly, with hardly any passage provided through the haphazard rows of book stalls, electric short circuits are only to be expected. Or the coal-burning backyard of restaurants posed another threat, let alone a marked rise in the incidence of acts of sabotage lately as vengeful expressions of settling scores on the side.

Aside from installing fire extinguishers we should have guards in place for the non-business books.

The moral of the story is, of course, this: The more unplanned the growth the greater the danger to civic life and property.

Culture of Obstruction

The busiest intersections of Maghbazar, Mirpur, Bangla Motor etc., are favourite locations where obstructions become really acute and our noble culture is uplifted to ever greater heights.

ON a busy intersection and at the height of a hectic working day, it is not unusual to find a group of workers putting up a huge shawlana with folding chairs neatly stacked right on the middle of the road, without caring for the traffic which ought to use the road. A road is a public thoroughfare. Every body has a right to its use at any time of day or night. In any other society, totally lacking in the culture of obstruction, the unhindered use of a public road can be prevented only by law enforcement agencies for security reasons or public safety and, that also, for the minimum period of time — so long it is absolutely necessary to do so.

No one, not even the political party in power, should have the right to organise a meeting or a function on a road. At best, it could be on the roadside without causing any harassment to road users. By no stretch of imagination, road is not for a public function. It is definitely not the place for a shawlana or folding chairs.

How else can it be a different story in Bangladesh? We are the originators of the unique culture of obstruction and it starts on the road. Therefore nobody is denied of the opportunity to suffer through stalled traffic and if you so desire, you may proceed further and join the crowd inside the shawlana.

Apart from toxic pollutants, there ought to be many good things originating from the middle of the road; and why should anyone miss it? The culture of obstruction have now been related to such an extent that lonely intersections of Baridhara or Uttara are never chosen.

The busiest intersections of Maghbazar, Mirpur, Bangla Motor etc., are favourite locations where obstructions become really acute and our noble culture is uplifted to ever greater heights — perhaps close to the seventh Heaven (basically it is the Hell, misconstrued as Heaven).

A basic feature of this culture of obstruction, shawlana-style, is that all law and order enforcing agency people, traffic police in particular, vanish from the site as soon as traffic jams start getting intensified. Mastrans appear from nowhere with sticks (and may be brooms as well) and start directing traffic at their own sweet will. Nobody minds. After all, we are all part of the same culture.

There are varieties of manifestation of this culture of obstruction. In shawlana road-blocks are the most brutal manifestation, we face daily these days. Since there is no rain, roads are dry and nobody minds the garbage and the dirt.

So if the traffic gets heavy, shawlana may come up on any road and at any time. These days many marriages are taking place all over the city. All the so-called community centres are fully booked. I think Municipal authorities can do a very good business by renting out roads for such marriage parties. Why not? We are short of space in this Golden Bengal.

In my student days, I remember, there were huge fields around the present-day Dhaka Stadium which were used for public meetings. In the old town area, the Victoria Park and the Armanitola Maidan used to be venues for public functions. Meetings were never held obstructing traffic on a road. The historic meeting of seventh November 1971, was held at Ramna Green. It was never on a road or even by the side thereof. In those days, the culture of obstruction — each with a gathering of 10,000 on the average — would include hardly one per cent of the population. No body wishes to be aware of the public sufferings. People in the cars are only the fortunate few and they must suffer, although the cars have not been bought out of tax-payers' money.

A highly dynamic and volatile offshoot of the culture of obstruction on the road, is the car breaking dramas, often unfolded as a part of the ritual followed at such public gatherings. Vandalism is a new type of protest that our political leaders have carefully nurtured over the last two decades where the cars of protesting politicians never get damaged. Since politicians are full of virtues, only the uninterested, totally uninvolved individuals must suffer. It is tragic but true that in most instances of police action resulting from a political agitation, innocent bystanders get killed, maimed or injured.

Politicians are speech makers. They are not responsible if I lose my car or my life.

But when someone suffers without being political in any way whatsoever, that someone will look for opportunities to take his own sweet revenge. If that someone happens to be a teller clerk of a bank, he will delay or create problems for the customers; or in case of a government official, would mysteriously discover faults and defects — all in the interest of (dis)service to the people. If I suffer at traffic intersections, I must make others suffer as well. Otherwise, the equation of life will not be balanced.

As a result, the culture of obstruction is being ramified each and every day. The rules of the game have become very simple. Try to be negative and ensure that nobody should gain in any way from my actions.

The overwhelming preference will be for inaction or those actions only which should prevent any gain to others. Not only that, people should be made to suffer since I suffered earlier as well.

This is the essence of the culture of obstruction. It has become all-pervading. The buses will stop in the middle of the road and not on its side, roads will be blocked for months and years when the work can be completed in one day or night by WASA, DESA, RAJUK — whatever is the agency involved. And, it is not only the public agencies, building contractors, shop owners and street vendors of all types have now moved from the side to almost the middle of the road without any care to the primary users of the road.

When the rains come another form of obstruction comes into play: the busiest roads will inevitably get flooded. Uttara or Baridhara roadways must always remain dry since those roads are infrequently used. The real crisis must be created at Kakrala, Shantinagar as well as deep inside Motijheel Commercial Area, where even on a normal working day, there is no dearth of traffic hazards.

Even the newly-built roads are not spared. Take for example the important connection called Pantha-Path. It has become an ideal place for public meetings, so that convenience created by this road connection can be easily frustrated and our culture of obstruction is sustained in all its glory.

Construction of speed breakers is yet another important device to keep up to our cultural aspirations. Often they are constructed not only to reduce speed for strange unknown reasons but also cause permanent damage to vehicles.

Basically, all the possible instruments of obstruction to life and work are working overtime in Golden Bengal. It all begins on the road. I am seriously thinking to promote the use of roads by the children for playing football or cricket. There will hardly be any empty space left after all the high-rises come up. What the children should do?

Roads should become the playing fields. It is for the sake of our future generation. They must be well grounded in the culture of obstruction.

Window on Asia
Shahed Latif

struction was yet to flourish. 16 December 1971, we were all liberated. No longer was there any need to care for public convenience. We started enjoying total freedom of speech. So a public gathering to listen to a free speech even at the cost of obstructing the traffic became the price of the freedom that we must pay. And, we must continue to pay that price ever after. In fact, the price seems to be going up since frequency of such public gatherings have increased in recent times. After all, population has increased; Dhaka is now a city of 8 to 10 million people and 10 such meetings at 10 busiest intersections.

Over the past 30 years, the Republicans have always given the nomination to their early front-runner. More disciplined and less diverse than Democrats who have gone on to pick early long shots like George McGovern, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton — the GOP has a clear preference for regular order.

If that pattern is to be broken, however, the next election would seem a prime time. Unlike Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, the elder George Bush and Mr Dole, Mr Powell is not an established Republican politician who has lots of chits with party leaders and rank and file; he may not even run next time.

The moderate former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is anathema to the party's right-wing activists, whose influence in the nominating process is disproportionate to their numbers. When Mr Powell flirted with running in 1995, the other camps, including Mr Dole's, were digging up background material that they thought would seriously hurt the general among hardcore Republican voters.

Mr Powell is basically pro-choice on abortion, favours retaining some form of affirmative action and is against any major dismantling of government social programmes. These views are shared by a majority of voters but not necessarily by those who turn out in GOP primaries.

With the Cold War over, his strength in foreign policy, is a secondary issue to many voters. In last month's poll, there are glimmerings of those difficulties. He scores lower among self-styled conservative Republicans and independents, among supporters of the Christian Coalition and among those with a positive view of House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Regionally, he does poorest in the South, now the Republicans' geographic base.

Yet whatever his potential problems as a GOP candidate, the strength shown by Mr Powell in this survey is pervasive and impressive. Among the half a dozen potential GOP candidates, he runs first in every region, and in every age group and income bracket. He runs equally well among women and men. "Even with two fiscal conservatives, one popular southern governor, a social moderate and a social conservative, Colin Powell still outpaces the field," says David Iannelli, an associate of Journal/NBC News pollster Robert Teeter.

Mr Kemp also shows strength across the board. Nevertheless, following his vice presidential run this year, many Republican leaders doubt he'll run in 2000. Gov Bush's strength will not doubt attract interest, though how much he can do on his own, without basking in the limelight of his father, is all open question. Still, Mr Iannelli, a Republican poll-taker, says the "big news" in this response is how well Gov Bush scores.

Even if General Colin Powell is nominated, his electability is debatable. Some whites, while professing to a poll-taker to support an African American candidate, nevertheless, have great difficulty pulling the lever for him in the privacy of the voting booth. A war hero, General Colin Powell is an African American of West Indian descent.

The writer is a Rhodes Scholar from Bangladesh, currently living in Princeton, USA

General Colin Powell, the Likely Republican Candidate in 2000

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton, USA

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To the Editor

Our monochrome society

Sir, Who are directing our society? Who should? Not the politicians alone. That appears to be what is happening. And nobody is protesting — not those who matter. The political leadership is split into two main camps of the two major political parties.

It is a black-and-white society, with no tones of grey. A monochrome society is polarised, and cannot develop properly.

It is time to introduce colours and tones and shades. Variety is the spice of life, and not categorical statements full of emphasis, assertions.

Are the unstable politicians over-reaching themselves, and trying to police the society, as US is trying to rule the world, by weakening the UN?

What is the deterrent for the politicians from social excesses? Those who know may come forward to set into motion a set of self-regulatory code of conduct. We still have to learn how to handle power, without mis-using it. We need politicians and politics to run the state, without overt state control.

A Zabr Dhaka

Traffic jam on the College Road

Sir, Ananda Mohan College is a well-known and important educational institution in the Greater Mymensingh. But the college has a great problem, regarding the road in front of the college gate. Though the road is very narrow, it is very important for communication with other institutions, such as Muslim Girls' High School, Mumunna College, Teachers' Training College, PTI, NAPE, Zilla School etc.

During the school, college and office hours, a terrible traffic jam is created on the College Road, especially in front of the college gate. Teachers, students and other professionals cannot reach their destinations in

proper time due to this jam. Sometimes, the jam lasts for hours. At that time no rickshaw or vehicle can move.

As a result, teachers, students and other professionals have no other way but to wait. For this reason, the office-goers fail to attend their respective duties in time. Besides, this situation looks very incoherent. So it is necessary to broaden the College Road urgently.

I request the authority concerned to solve this problem not only for the teachers and students, but also for the people in general.

Debashish Paul Department of English A M University College, Mymensingh.

'Of Reality and Gratitude'

Sir, Curiosity gave way to amazement, anguish and rage, in that order, as I went through Kuldip Nayyar's 'Of Reality and Gratitude'. The truth in this case is reality does not justify gratitude to its undeserving claimants. Is it a product of the outpourings of the past 21 years of euphoria (or shall I say hysteria) which stimulated the renowned journalist to pen this article contemptuous and most offensive in spirit and language. Patriotism certainly would not be one of the virtues of any Bangladeshi tempted to endorse, far less hail, the write-up.

The Daily Star, however, deserves to be congratulated for its subtle journalism of exposition, and make the article available for perusal of laymen like I.

In this unabashed and blatant attempt to extract unwilling gratitude, Mr Nayyar has not cared to spare even Bangabandhu in the course of his scathing and abrasive criticism of Bangabir Osman. He has demonstrated very little care about our sentiments when he expresses resentment at giving all credit to the Mukti Bahini. Our brave Mukti Bahini sacrificed their lives for a cause while the Indian soldiers were

killed in line of duty. I am afraid, the meaning of sacrifice has been sacrificed by a journalist of Mr Nayyar's stature. Sacrifice of Mukti Bahini can be matched by Mukti Bahini and Mukti Bahini alone, no matter whoever might he may be. Our independence which is total, absolute and unconditional, was not a result of any gift or act of mercy.

Gratitude comes forth spontaneously and when you need to resort to demanding it, one must acknowledge that events do not justify gratification and silence is the prudence of the wise. Then why this huff and puff and the growl? The logical answer is undisguised expectations of sycophancy and supplications, indicating that our varied apprehensions are not unfounded. While questioning the act of Bangabandhu in not erecting a memorial of gratitude, the father of the nation has been referred to as the "Sheikh".

It would be only befitting to the memory of the 30 lakh Bangladeshi souls, to demand unqualified apology for the atrocious statements falling which Mr Kuldip and his cohorts be declared persona non grata in Bangladesh. Mr Kuldip Nayyar, we are a small nation but with a very large ego, which we are prepared to pamper at costs not envisaged by you, your believers or for that matter, your followers amongst us. Even elephants have been crippled by wrong moves and miscalculated steps.

A Concerned Patriot North Dhanmondi Dhaka

A request to PSC

Sir, The viva-voce round of the 17th BCS examination is in progress. I humbly request the Public Service Commission not to consider any candidate for appointment to the Foreign Office if he/she fails to secure a minimum of 60 per cent marks in compulsory English.

Naureen Tabassum Dept of Public Administration University of Rajshahi

Art Buchwald's COLUMN

Greetings from Cuba

N OBODY knows if the Pope really wanted to see Fidel Castro or if Castro really wanted to see the Pope. But they did meet, and people commented on how nice Castro looked in his new suit, and how the Pope dressed down — by wearing the same clothes he wears every day.

The visit came as a surprise to everyone, especially the CIA, which was so busy looking for its own spies that it didn't have time to track Castro on a boat heading for Italy.

When the word got out that Fidel was visiting the Vatican, the State Department flipped. An assistant secretary called the Bay of Pigs desk and said, "Doesn't the Pope realise it's against American law for him to shake hands with the bearded one?"

"His Holiness is not an American." "All the more reason not to see Castro. We won't let the Canadians deal with Cuba, and we don't want a Polish Pope trading handshakes with Fidel."

"It's too late," the desk said. "They have spent time together and the Pope has promised Castro he will visit him in Cuba."

"This infuriated the secretary. 'Why didn't our people in Havana warn us this was going to happen?'"

"They did, but Castro's side put out the word that he was dressing up to go to Moscow to do the macarena with Boris Yeltsin."

"What went wrong with our agents in the Vatican?" "That should have been suspicious when a box of Havana cigars landed by parachute on the balcony of the pontiff's living quarters."

Unfortunately, they were so intent on planting a mole in the church choir that they didn't guess who was coming to dinner.

"We're not going to stand for this. At least, Jesse Helms is not going to stand for it. If Castro and the Pope have signed anything, we'll impose a trade embargo on the Vatican and boycott anything they export."

"You're right. Anyone who plays footsie with Cuba doesn't have a prayer of getting a trade break with the United States."

"Mr Secretary, the phone's ringing off the hook with calls from Cubans in Florida who want to know what we plan to do about this meeting between the Pope and Castro. They say it's carpet-bombing time for St Peter's Square."

"Sir, I just got a fax from CIA headquarters."

"Castro's being fitted for a new suit at Sulka's. Believe this means he's planning rendezvous with Fergie, the Duchess of York, in Trafalgar Square."

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OPINION

"Of Transit and Port Facilities"

Badrul Hassan

The Daily Star has published a good number of articles on transit issue. Recently my attention has been drawn to the article "Of Transit and Port Facilities" (December 3, 1996) written by Brig (Retd) M Abdul Hafiz.

It is confusing and lacks relevant information. It seems that the writer is unaware of the fact that India has officially asked for transit and port facilities from Bangladesh. If there was no official proposal then how could I K Gujral, the Indian Foreign Minister had the chance to mix transit issue with that of trade? For more information, on August 3, 1994, an Indian business delegation visited Bangladesh to attend the meeting of the Bangladesh-India Joint Trade Council. Chairman of the Council D Patodi officially offered a package of proposals on trade, transit and port facilities (August 3-7, The Daily Star) which, reportedly, R L Vatia, the Deputy Foreign Minister of India had conveyed to his Bangladeshi counterpart earlier.

I apprehend that the text of the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) has failed to draw due attention of the writer. It is not according to the pro-transit lobbyists in Bangladesh, but the Article 12 of the SAPTA document, "Contracting states agree to undertake appropriate steps and measures for developing and improving communication system, transport infrastructure and transit facilities for accelerating the growth for trade within the region." In this connection, I want to refer to the proposal of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for the Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). In 1992, ESCAP endorsed an Integrated Asian Land Transport Infrastructure

Development (ALTID) project, comprising the Asian Highway and the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) for the promotion of trans-boundary multipurpose facilitation throughout the region. In 1994, ESCAP surveyed the prospect of transit facility in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, we also have the opportunity to analyse the feasibility of the project.

It is true that transit was not a prior issue in the foreign policy agenda of Bangladesh. But it did exist, not only related to our bilateral relations with India but also with its neighbouring countries. Countries of this region had underscored the necessity of trans-boundary trade and transit long ago. Nepal and Bhutan asked India to grant two-way transit facility to materialise the Bangladesh-Nepal Trade and Transit Treaty of 1976 and the Agreement on Trade between Bangladesh and Bhutan of 1980. But due to Indian rejection, those treaties remained ineffective. In the treaty with Nepal, Bangladesh also agreed to open up the Chittagong Port to Nepalese export and import from overseas countries.

It is fallacious to argue that South Asia needs to experience the Renaissance, the Great Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, or the French Revolution before facilitating transit facilities among the countries of the region. It was indicated that the asymmetry and the disparity existing between the East and the West in terms of social, political and technological development. It implies that countries like Bangladesh are ineligible to take part in the international activities offered and practiced by the Western world. Thus there is no justifi-

cation of being a party to international treaties like GATT, NPT, CTBT, UNCLOS etc!

It was denied to accept the great changes that had taken place after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Interdependence and the enforcement of the regimes (e.g. GATT regime, NPT regime, Environmental regime, Law of the Sea (LOS) regime etc.) are setting the implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which states' expectations converge in a given area of international relations. So, in this post-capitalist world, it would not be wise enough for a tiny country like Bangladesh to keep itself apart from the regionalised economic integration followed by the end of the Cold War.

There are many unresolved issues between India and Bangladesh. As the upper-riparian state of the Ganges, India failed to perform her duties according to international law. But recently India has signed an agreement with Bangladesh on the Ganges water sharing in a kind of *modus vivendi*, since the quantum of water available at the Farakka point is of prime concern. India has also decided to issue over-land visa to the Nepalese citizens to visit Bangladesh which it declined for long. India satisfied us by not relating the Ganges water sharing with any other issue that I K Gujral promised earlier. India's recent endeavour to develop bilateral relations with neighbours indicates the significant change in the country's foreign policy. It has shown positive intention to solve the problems existing in all other inter-territorial disputes. Bangladesh can consider to give transit facility to India in terms of its own interest.