

No Pull of History

We are showing a sign of maturity in certain parameters of the organised national thought-process. For instance, issues once virtually tabooed for their sensitivity or otherwise consigned to arm-chair confabulation are being unhesitatingly discussed today at the institutional level. The scholastic inputs are as prized as the angle of information dissemination so as to generate a greater understanding of the role of vital national institutions in a democracy.

We find that the inaugural day's proceedings of the annual seminar on Civil-Military Relations, organised by the Defence Services Command and Staff College (DSCSC) at the Mirpur cantonment on Wednesday have been highly thought-provoking.

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad made three important points at the moot: the pre-eminence of the Civil Authority is beyond question, the AL government is firmly committed to a thoroughly professional defence force and the armed forces and civil authorities must work in concert.

Carrying the baggage of history in matters of vital systemic importance must be deemed to have become a thoroughly obsolete and untenable exercise in today's forward-looking world. In fact, it is the positive aspects of our history that need not only to be constantly borne in mind but also furthered in expanding circles, so that the whole nation finds itself fully galvanised behind the task of national advancement.

The armed forces having demonstrated their 'support and commitment to democratic government and rule of law' in the recent years have earned respect at home and abroad. They have done us proud by their participation in the UN peace-keeping missions; their damage — limitation efforts during natural disasters have been extremely useful; and their fatigue from a long engagement in the CHT is duly noted.

They should now forge ahead without harking back to the past.

Welcome John Major

British Prime Minister John Major's visit to the sub-continent — India, Bangladesh and Pakistan — has aptly been dubbed as a trade mission. Representatives of as many as 50 British companies accompany him. Of the six days of his official tour of the region three will be spent here in Bangladesh. This shows how Britain and Bangladesh view their existing relations and look forward to strengthening those, particularly in the areas of technological and industrial collaboration and trade and economy. No wonder that the subject to prominently figure in the official talks between him and his counterpart Sheikh Hasina is also trade and economic co-operation. Although some regional and international issues will be discussed and the exchange of views thereon would be mutually beneficial, the focus will be on strengthening the bilateral relations.

Britain's traditional link with the sub-continent places her in an advantageous position to understand the special problems of South Asia. Yet in matters of politics Britain no longer shows the keen interest it used to do in the past. The reason is quite understandable. Britain under successive Conservative governments is yet to settle the issue of its integration with the European Union. With the entry of other big economic players into the region, Britain has, moreover, withdrawn itself a bit from the area. However, the UK is still a major player on the world stage and its industrial and technological base gives it a good deal of saleability. John Major's visit once again proves the fact that the North-South relations beg for a re-evaluation. It is not Bangladesh alone that looks for expanding its market in the UK, the latter could be having a reciprocal interest in Bangladesh as well.

However, the acid test for North-South relations comes in the form of transfer of technology. Britain certainly has a technological edge, suited to our situation because of our long association with her, over other developed countries that can be put to use for the maximum possible benefit here. Britain might also feel a kind of obligation. Our earnest hope is she would take a lead in respect of transfer of technology.

Coordinate to Deliver

The third meeting of the coordination committee of different service agencies of the city yielded some important decisions: a) the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) will have to take all necessary measures to make the city free of water-logging by March next; and b) other service organisations should get their act together for the sake of eradicating the mosquito menace. There is a feeling that their concerted activities are producing some results. No doubt when the full potential of the interactions is realised, the city will stand to benefit immensely.

Apart from the logistic implications of coordination and cooperation among different utility agencies, the various programmes launched by one agency depend on the succeeding plans and programmes undertaken by other service agencies for their successful implementation. This is because of the interconnected nature of physical facilities. We still notice overlapping of works between different agencies. The coordination committee will hopefully be able to get this over with in order to stave off wastefulness. To that end they must draw up forward-looking plans, to meet the requirements of a growing city for the next 50 or 100 years. Otherwise, excessive pressure on facilities will call for frequent emergency repair works.

It is good to know that the meeting has decided to ban rickshaws from a few roads and declare some roads as one-way streets. The committee will have to take some unpleasant decisions for the sake of improving the city's living conditions. Better management warrants bold, innovative and even ruthless actions sometimes. We wish the coordination committee success.

Deve Gowda Faces Problems from Within

The criticism on foreign affairs may not stick because for the first time in many years India has been able to mend fences with Nepal and Bangladesh. In fact, the failure of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao is in sharp contrast to the success that the Gowda government has achieved in the first six months.

on Gowda's performances off and on.

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His government is, however, vulnerable in the economic field. Exports are lessening; industrial units are declining in production and domestic savings are decreasing. Inflation looks like touching a double digit. But Deve Gowda can justifiably argue that the downward trend in economy cannot be because of his 7-month-old government. Former finance minister Manmohan Singh, who heads the Congress cell on economy, will have to answer a lot. Still, lack of concrete steps for the future will come in handy to Kesri. Strange, the government should issue orders that no manager of nationalised bank can be interrogated by the CBI without government's prior permission as if it has a lot to hide.

Instead of meeting the Congress challenge squarely, Deve Gowda is trying to placate it. He has been doing so since Narasimha Rao was heading the party. He had even a Rax telephone, a secret network of communication for ministers and top officials, installed at his residence. They would talk twice or thrice a day. Rao had his men included in the Planning Commission and some officials' tenure extended. (Rao still has the phone).

Deve Gowda is again on tip

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

tees, this time dealing with Kesri. How can he confront Congress when the prime minister is afraid to annoy it? He has not yet realised that the party has to accept him because it has no other choice. It cannot allow either the BJP to come to power, or afford to face a mid-term poll.

Kesri's purpose is to keep pressure on Deve Gowda to prove to Congress MPs that he would fulfil their hopes now that they had elected him their leader. They preferred him to comparatively younger Sharad Pawar, former chief minister of Maharashtra. Kesri looked more shrewd and experienced to them. On his part, he is doing his best, cajoling, promising and pressuring MPs in other parties.

His main attention at present is on GK Moopanar from Tamil Nadu so as to make him return to Congress. The latter is not enthusiastic because Kesri can not match the offer the United Front made to him. He was asked to lead the Front after Jyoti Basu and VP Singh said 'no'. Even if Kesri were to offer him leadership, Moopanar would not be reconciled to Narasimha Rao, who had turned him out of Congress. Moreover, DMK leader and chief minister M Karunanidhi, at present a close associate of Moopanar, has no liking for Congress.

Kesri's predicament is that even with Moopanar and

Karunanidhi, Congress does not reach anywhere near the figure of 273, required for a majority in the 545-member Lok Sabha. He is, reportedly, in touch with Bihar chief minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, also the Janata Dal chief, who has not liked the CBI cross-examination in the fodder scam.

(Laloo Yadav vainly approached Gowda to stop it). Kesri, also from Bihar, believes that he can assuage the feelings of Laloo Yadav by promising that Congress will have strict control on the CBI.

Laloo Yadav, even prevailed upon to support Congress, can at best take 15 MPs with him. Still all this will not give Kesri the number to challenge the government in power. He has to have on his side both the communists and regional parties like the Telugu Desam and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), which together have 110 members in the Lok Sabha. The communists are dead set against Congress. As Harkishan Singh Surjeet, the CPI (M) secretary general, says that they would have no truck with Congress, even as a coalition partner. He has special reason to oppose Congress: in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, where the CPM is in power, Congress is its rival. The Telugu Desam and the AGP also have Congress as their sole opponent.

Deve Gowda knows that, and therefore, keeps Surjeet on his

side. But what he does not realise is that Jyoti Basu has reopened the question of leadership by observing that the CPM's "historic blunder" was not to have joined the UP government. He was not only reminding his party of the impact they would have made if they had been in the government but he was also warning Deve Gowda that his prosaic performance was not good enough for the closure of leadership subject.

There is no immediate danger to him but his position may become untenable as the days go by. He has been at best a plodder, who has not shown any distinctive or decisive qualities. His efforts to placate Congress or the United Front constituents will be to no avail until he proves his ability to govern. Playing man against man or faction against faction is one type of activity.

To the Editor...

"Special Economic Zone in Jalalabad"

Sir, Thanks are due for the valuable article written by AMA Muhith and M Farashuddin in the Focus page published on December 31, 1996. It is a fact that greater Sylhet is still neglected for quick industrialisation, though it has great potentials in natural resources and foreign exchange earnings. So, we here like to add some more suggestions.

a) Development of infrastructure of international standard is very essential like railway, roads, air services from Sylhet-London-Sylhet, power sectors etc., including LSD tele-

phone exchange as suggested by the writers.

b) The present Local Government authority should quickly declare Sylhet as a city corporation, as it has been promised.

c) All the divisional offices should be started in Sylhet for social, political and economic development.

d) An international bank should be established in Sylhet with the help of non-resident Bangladeshis who live in UK, USA, Middle East etc.

e) The attention of the present ministers, Speaker, secretaries, MPs and other elite of greater Sylhet is very necessary

M Ali, Rajshahi

RECALLING BANGABANDHU

Reminiscences in Earnest

by Syed Badrul Haque



Way back in 1956, these two photographs were taken in Dhaka at the then East Pakistan Secretariat (now Bangladesh Secretariat) and at Hotel Shahbagh (now converted into IJGMR). The photo on the right shows Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (in white shirt), then a cabinet minister attending a meeting of the East Pakistan Planning Commission with Mr Ataur Rahman Khan, the then Chief Minister, presiding. Cabinet ministers Mr Mansur Ali and Mr Dharendra Nath Dutta are also seen, among others. The photo on the left shows Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Minister in-charge of Commerce, Labour and Industries at a dinner hosted by the Dacca Chamber of Commerce. Among the journalists are seen Syed Jafar Ali, chief reporter of the Daily Azad (writing, facing camera) and Mr Fazlul Karim of the Dainik Pakistan (now city editor, Dainik Bangla) and myself (back to camera in the rear).

At that moment, it was obviously beyond me to imagine that the photographs has also captured the images of the architect of independence of Bangladesh, now the home of a hundred and twenty million of his fellow Bengalees who had to live in utter ignominy for ages under colonial rule.

After a stint of journalism behind, my first assignment as the reporter attached to the Hon'ble Minister in-charge of Commerce, Labour and Industries, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the benchmark in my career in government service. Syed Sadequr Rahman who was then a Deputy Director in the Public Relations Directorate personally took me to the Hon'ble Minister's room which was then on the first floor, on top of the present Secretariat canteen (then known as Shahbagh canteen). Frankly, as a fresher in the government service and particularly for that assignment, I was feeling somewhat shaky. But, soon after I was introduced to the Hon'ble Minister, I felt reassured and comfortable. I could easily discern his simplicity and warmth of heart, a hallmark of his personality. But the charisma he possessed could not be missed by any one coming

in his contact.

To revert, as Syed Sadequr Rahman, followed by me, entered into the room, the Hon'ble Minister was all courtesy to Mr Rahman and greeted him as 'Sadequebhai'. The relationship between them was, in fact, rooted in their commitment to common political causes during the pre-partition days in Calcutta. Later, Mr Sadequr Rahman rose to the top position in the department, and is now leading a retired life at his Dhanmondi residence.

In one of his official tours to Faridpur town, Bangabandhu asked me to accompany him on his inspection visit of the local jail. As he was going round the jail compound, he suddenly stopped in front of a cell and remained standing there for some time. For a moment, he seemed lost in nostalgia. He told us — the officials present — of his imprisonment in that particular cell for protesting repression by the government.

But only after a few months in office, Bangabandhu elected to opt out from the cosy club of ministerial comfort and authority and be with his hapless people to galvanise them to freedom movement albeit on a graduated scale — a star role he seemed to be preparing for all his life. Since then an "eternity" went into oblivion. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became Bangabandhu and father of the nation as Bangladesh emerged on the world map from a classic war of liberation in contemporary history.

In the early days of independence, we had streams of visitors from all corners of the globe. Mr Arshaduzzaman, the erstwhile Director of Public Relations (presently a columnist in The Daily Star), asked me to accompany a venerated German writer on her visit to Bangabandhu at road number 32, Dhanmondi. Bangabandhu received the honoured guest at the doorstep of his residence and took her to the drawing room. The writer complimented Bangabandhu for his unique leadership in the liberation movement that won freedom for the Bengali nation. Bangabandhu expressed his deep appreciation for the support ex-

tended by her country in rebuilding our war-ravaged economy. I recollect.

Presently, we celebrated the silver jubilee of independence, a landmark in our nationhood. The journey to this day, however, had been far from smooth, stifling at times. And Bangabandhu's Sonar Bangla, an euphemism for economic prosperity and distributive justice for his people continues to remain a distant dream. In common perception, however, much of the road-blocks would have gone before long if only the political parties en masse were not to take to hartals (general strike) under any pretext whatsoever, and the MPs had also completed their mandated term in the Parliament. The silver jubilee euphoria or the current democratic order must also not make us naive as to ignore the anxieties of negative politics with a certain cavalier disdain. For, it cost so much in the past particularly in terms of our economic growth, and no less dented our psyche in general. In the end, the role of the political parties is to upscale the nation's interest which embraces all across the political divide. The upshot of this rationale demands that a consensus on national issues, a critically missing element in our political culture, has to be reached by all political parties — both in the government and the opposition, on priority basis. Once the consensus is in place, our politics will have a better chance to make a difference in the country's governance and improve its prosperity rating.

Before signing off this rather thin piece which is more on a personal note, may I suggest to our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to put up a notice to identify the cell in the Faridpur jail where Bangabandhu had to spend his days imprisoned as a mark of historic remembrance. This may be done in other jails also where Bangabandhu was imprisoned for championing the people's cause. In South Africa, the prison where Mr Nelson Mandela, their national hero, was kept in captivity has been nationally preserved.

by ASM Nurunnabi

Reminiscence of an Old Civil Servant

At the age of middle sixties, many memories of one's life in the middle forties get somewhat faded. Yet there are some spots in the memory bank which could not be effaced.

Some of the highlights of these memories related to the period immediately after the independence of Bangladesh at the end of the War of Liberation. The country had just then been going through the process of immense changes in many spheres, including government administration.

As a mid-ranking government officer, I was connected with a Cabinet Sub-Committee concerned with approval of purchase proposals received from ministries, corporations, autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies with financial implications beyond certain limits. The Cabinet Sub-Committee comprised the Finance Minister, the Industries Minister and the Commerce Minister. The Sub-Committee used to hold its meeting every week to decide on such purchase proposals. The financial limits for

the purchase proposals for which the approval of the Sub-Committee was necessary, was fixed and refixed from time to time.

At the weekly meeting of the Sub-Committee, the purchase proposals received during the preceding week were discussed and decided in consultation with the representatives of the sponsoring authorities. A distinguished officer of the ex-CPSC cadre acted as Secretary of that Committee, and I worked under him as Deputy Secretary of the Prime Minister's (subsequently President's) Secretariat. As his deputy, it was my initial job to draft the proceedings of the weekly meeting of the Sub-Committee. Thereafter, the draft proceedings on being okayed by the Secretary of the Sub-Committee, were placed before the three Cabinet members for their vetting and finally to the Prime Minister/President for his approval. Afterwards, government orders were issued in the light of the approved proposals.

The approved proposals of the Sub-Committee needed to be

pursued with utmost speed. As such, as Deputy Secretary of the Secretariat, the relevant file used to be carried by me to each member of the Sub-Committee for signature and then to the Prime Minister/President for his final approval.

It needs hardly any mention that the whole process starting from the placement of the purchase proposals before the Sub-Committee to the issue of government orders after obtaining the approval of the Prime Minister/President involved a hectic pace of activity on the part of the concerned officials of the Secretariat. There were some occasions when the signature of the Cabinet Minister concerned had to be obtained at odd hours even at night by securing access to his private chamber at home.

In this context, an incident may be recalled, in which the final approval of the President was required on the last date of a tender offer. Otherwise the validity of the offer would expire the next day that might cause financial loss to government. On that day Bangabandhu

was extremely busy in connection with preparations for the wedding of his eldest son. I found no way to get in touch with him through his personal staff. As a last resort, I could contact the Finance Minister and explained to him the difficult situation. The Finance Minister understood my position and asked me to wait while he tried on his own to contact the President. At last he was able to speak to the President. Afterwards he rang me back to say that the approval of the President had been obtained verbally and he directed me to issue government orders accordingly. I was thus saved from a very difficult situation on the intervention of the Finance Minister.

On many occasions, I had to pass through similar odd situations for obtaining signatures of the Cabinet members concerned and the Prime Minister/President. As the time constraint was involved in processing such purchase proposals, I had to remain always on my toes. Even when a cabinet member was in progress, I did not

want to lose a single moment when the meeting was over, enabling me to have access to the members concerned cabinet and Bangabandhu.

I vividly recall the times when Bangabandhu, on conclusion of his official work at noon, used to come down from his first-floor chamber in the Gonobhaban Secretariat and walk along the concrete pathway by the side of the flower garden towards his residential quarters in Gonobhaban along with some notable persons following him. As he passed by my office chamber on the ground floor at lunch time, I could hear of his approaching presence from the shuffling sound created by his loose dress. This was almost a frequent occurrence when Bangabandhu worked in his chamber at the Gonobhaban Secretariat.

In course of my official duties requiring access to Bangabandhu for securing his approval to purchase proposals cleared by the Cabinet Sub-Committee, I was struck by his extraordinary gift for remem-

bering names. I was just a nonentity in the large number of visitors wanting to see him for one reason or another. But he could remember the names of the officers working under him in his Secretariat. Whenever required for official business, I was called by my name.

On a particular occasion during the wedding reception for his eldest son, when there were heavy rains which did not deter the vast crowd of invitees, I was standing in the midst of some groups of people in a narrow passage on the ground floor of Gonobhaban. Suddenly I saw Bangabandhu passing along that passage. Spotting me on the edge of a group, he queried: "Have you taken your food?"

My stay for about three years as the President's Secretariat at Gonobhaban came to an end on 14th August, 1976 when a farewell party was being held in the evening in the ground floor hall room of Gonobhaban in honour of a couple of officers of the President's Secretariat on the eve of their departure for training abroad.