

Thank You Mr Major

John Major's visit to Bangladesh — only second by any British Prime Minister since David Callaghan's at the fag-end of seventies — is destined to go down as a major foreign policy event.

In the encouraging presence of the British premier, Bangladesh signed an agreement with a multinational group to pave the way for \$ 197 m investment for exploration and production of gases. With the key company being Cairn Energy of UK, the contract does not only deserve to be reckoned as a heartening development towards optimal utilisation of Bangladesh's natural resources but also as a symbolic act for the exploration of newer vistas in British-Bangladesh trade relationship.

This is a rejuvenation of a rich relationship based on commitment to the cause of development and commercial cooperation. To quote Mr Major, Bangladesh receives more British bilateral aid than almost any other country. Besides, Britain has large commercial presence in Bangladesh and currently it is our second largest export destination.

Mr Major's liberal utterances in support of free trade and open market which reflected his conviction, have given boost to our hopes for further improvement in the global trade atmosphere. His candid observations that tariff and non-tariff barriers should be dismantled 'as comprehensively and as speedily as possible' merit special mention; for, we hope the British Premier's leadership in the European context will go a long way in preserving the commercial interest of the developing countries like Bangladesh. Particularly at a time when regional blocs are increasingly and alarmingly adopting an isolationist and conservative approach.

Our hope is that Mr Major will not only exercise his influence to broaden and deepen the production base of Bangladesh with uninterrupted flow of foreign investment but also to undo the barriers Bangladesh may find in its quest for more business into the European Union.

As it often comes from the wisdom of a well-meaning friend, Mr Major alongside his generous assurance of Britain's commitment to Bangladesh's development identified political stability as of utmost importance for continued foreign investment. This point is well taken.

Chargeholders' Club

Our universities have one ailment — absentee teachers. The bigger the university, the longer the list of teachers supposedly pursuing higher knowledge — for whom one is never sure — and overstaying beyond regular leave. To add to this predicament, Dhaka University is for years going without 50 of its key administrative posts properly manned or womaned. If the set-up is magical enough to keep on going without these heavyweights, the posts should immediately be declared redundant.

But a Daily Star report says the august organisation is suffering for this. And it is not true that the fifty spots are all as unoccupied as a haunted house. Re-appointees are filling the void as is also done by persons 'holding charge'. This charge business comes in two variations. Charges can be concurrently held by ones already heading a department. And those in number two slot can as well be asked to discharge duties and responsibilities of the untraceable one at the top. This is overall a picture of what now obtains in DU.

Why is this crowd of charged people there? Does the DU want to save on its yearly pay-out? Hardly. It may be that while some top men do not like to make way even after their tenure is over, some others may have used their influence to garner an additional job for some money made on the sideline. There may be cases where deputies, not yet ripe to land their boss's job in a regular manner, are keeping the empty spot engaged by keeping a foot on it — in exchange for a charge allowance.

All of this is unfortunate and speaks of a stagnant cesspool — resisting healthy infusion from outside. The university must give up this charge business and go for above-board recruitment to all of its administrative vacancies.

Happy Tidings

Dr Ali Bacher, the wonder man from the great Mandela's nation, came to Bangladesh as a veritable angel. — a harbinger of the good news we have been waiting for years. He is more than just a bearer of good tidings. The tidings — in this case Bangladesh's getting into the ODI status by next July, this being slated to land Bangladesh on the Test elite — are but the handiwork of Dr Bacher himself and Majid Khan, his colleague on the ICC Development Committee.

To reciprocate the good turn we can assure the South African cricket leader that this action would go a long way in the true globalisation of the distinguished sport, a goal Dr Bacher has been exerting to achieve.

So, Bangladesh must right now start on a fail-safe programme of preparations leading to justifying the honour coming our way. Not unlike what is true of independence, making good use of the new status may indeed prove more difficult than achieving the same.

This nation has a tradition of being lavish with sport supports. And sadly there is also a tradition of these coming to nothing. Let cricket prove an exception for a change. The ODI status is a matter of months and no efforts should be spared to travel from there to the Test club.

No doubt Dhaka's lively club cricket situation has done much to enable Bangladesh to take its first step in international sport. This should only serve as an inspiration to boost school and college cricket — the true breeding ground of genuine talent in a game that is unsurpassable in lore and high and refined literature. Almost a culture by itself.

A Winter of Happiness

By any estimation, this winter so far has generated more political news than perhaps any of the preceding six months. The biggest news was of course the Indo-Bangladesh agreement on the sharing of Ganges water.

I missed my last week's column and I am sorry about it. In my forty-two years teaching career I have sometimes missed a lecture. The fault has more often been the class's than mine. As a columnist writing for one of our dailies I cannot claim never to have failed keeping my commitment, as did last week, but I do not think such occasions are many. My self-assessment, in respect of regularity of habits, will be on a positive note.

At this point I will make one admission. In find that the older I grow and the farther I move away from my professional commitments, the stronger becomes the societal claims on my time. At my age, these vary from person to person, depending on one's taste, bent of mind, and not the least,

been seen as an achievement of both the governments in Delhi and Dhaka, of Deve Gowda and Sheikh Hasina. Jyoti Basu of West Bengal played a crucial role in breaking a stalemate which his positive approach and a rare combination of political will of both the governments at Delhi and Dhaka made possible. The credit of achieving something which only the other day seemed impossible, goes equally to all three of them. At the same time, one must not underestimate the value of Gujral and Samad's patient diplomacy. Both proved what solid services ministers can render their chiefs when they combine ability and commitment to a cause. About Gujral, there never was any doubt. But Abdus Samad Azad certainly proved how deceptive his appearance was, how all his

less successful than expected from the point of view of sales but was otherwise a neat thing. My only criticism is about those book stalls that were full of other people's fares. Publishing houses in the real sense of the term are still few, far out-numbered by booksellers pretending to be publishers as well.

Music and drama did better. There were a number of sponsored musical evenings with invited and noted Indian artists performing before an enthralled audience rich in purpose. This was the elitist part of the cultural scene. But on the popular level, both the series of road side drama — *patha nataka* — and the regular plays given by our group theatres showed once again the supremacy of theatre in the field of entertainment. Nagark Natyangan came out with some-

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

the society's estimation of the man. About the last point, I have an observation. As one can be quite wrong in one's self assessment, others can be equally wrong in their assessment of a man. It is not our fault if many of us are strutting about in society wearing false caps. It may be one of them, who knows?

The doubt assails me when I am asked to play a role in one of our numerous public occasions which is clearly beyond me. I was fully exposed to the hazard as the head of an institution. There is a gap of thirteen years between now and then. The hazard has remained, with certain modification in its nature. One has to come to with those elements in one's life that are extraneous. Keep some room for the extraneous and the rest for your true self, is the motto I have tried to live by.

As I write, we are half way through our winter. Our winter is short and, as we like to think, very special. The holy Ramzan's intervention, to the extent it was within our knowledge, only served to intensify the round of social and cultural activities of the pre-Ramzan days. On the political plane, though the Parliament was not in session, politics knew no rest. In fact, it spoke in thousand tongues. By any estimation, this winter so far has generated more political news than perhaps any of the preceding six months. The biggest news was of course the Indo-Bangladesh agreement on the sharing of Ganges water. The agreement has rightly

convolutions finally led to a point.

The opposition's, I mean the main opposition party's, reaction to the agreement is unfortunate. It has looked at the treaty from a narrow party point of view, not from the national point of view. In trying to show that it has been a bad treaty serving more of India's interests than Bangladesh's, it has not produced many convincing arguments. And whatever flaws it has found in the treaty, it has not presented in the proper language of politics. Perhaps, when the Sangsad meets again in its third session on the 15th this month, the opposition will be more collected in its approach and more honest in its criticism. I am sure it will concentrate on the absence of the arbitration clause. I myself am not sure if an arbitration clause is essential for all international treaties/agreements. At any rate, the agreement will be placed before the Sangsad, in keeping with the parliamentary practice, and the nation expects the House to produce, for once, an example of solid and sane parliamentary debate. The Sangsad is in dire need of proving that it is worthy of its role.

On the cultural plane, the season was hectic. Silver Jubilee of our Liberation and its celebration in a freer political climate ensured that this winter was going to be richer than usual with cultural activities. The National Book Fair was advanced by a month. It was

thing special, a drama festival with participation of several local and two noted Calcutta theatre groups. Both the Calcutta groups — Bahurupi and Sundaram — gave conclusive evidence of their superior art in terms of both drama and acting. One clear aspect of their superiority was in the quality of speech, or elocution if you will.

The season was further enriched by some good film events and also with the visit of noted film personalities like Mrinal Sen and Gautam Ghosh. The visit of two heads of government — Indian and British — and the holding of the first Bangladesh Football Cup tournament that promises to be the supreme football event of the city combined with other events already mentioned have given the season the fullness that will remain a treasured memory for many of us. This has been a winter of happiness, of fulfillment and the happiness will be complete if only our parliamentarians will shake hands on the floor of the Sangsad in a few days' time. The nation hopes and prays that they will.

ERRATUM

In the article "On Jahangirnagar's First Convocation" by Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, published on January 5 in this paper, the fourth line of the last para should be read as "... Chancellor, who is not only..." instead of "...Chancellor, who is not..."

OPINION

An Enlarged Menu

A Zabr

After the over-saturated December celebrations of the ironing of the white linen in public (no disrespect intended), the new year offers a menu with more variety. The boring two party political hate-affair has now more experienced and tough suitors to enliven the political scene. The chess board is likely to live up with more moves, to what the appetite of the armchair critics and the street jockers.

Another interesting shift cannot go unnoticed: the nine vice-chancellors of our universities went to the President instead of the Prime Minister in the quest for peace on the campus front. Politics is sporting with more teams in the arena: a third non-political lobby (of the intellectuals) is fair pastime. Catalytic agents serve a useful purpose, as students

of chemistry are aware; but political catalysts are tricky to handle. Let us hope for the best.

But former president Ershad is likely to capture the limelight initially, at least for the curious effect. As a shrewd politician, he will keep the other master minds guessing about his moves, a tactic very basic to the art of politics (we have no science of politics in this society, and the art is in short supply).

Another important player to watch keenly is the unhappy Kader Siddiqui of Tangail and '71 fame, sans medal, but now armed with mature cerebral power.

Regardless of the quantum of the flow of the Ganga water, the

political debate on the accord will continue, like the ebb and flow tide (now detectable, watching the river, it is hoped). One more antibiotic or virus has been introduced in the drawing rooms, namely, the sub-regional mini-SAARC topic.

As the proof of the pudding lies in the eating, let us hope the positive output will increase in volume towards the development of the sub-region, and not the protests — the latter promised by the opposition, after the holy month.

The public will be kept merrily engaged in these half-splitting exercises we love, till the rains come, with open sesame at the Farakka gates. Till then, we are supposed to appreciate the small gratitudes coming in the way, over land or water.

To the Editor...

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

Sir Salimullah

Sir, This refers to the article "Contribution of Nawab Sir Salimullah," published on 12.1.97. After going through this well-written article, I found a few errors when the writer mentioned the names of the Nawab's father and grandfather. These are corrected below:

a) Nawab Sir Khawaja Salimullah was the son of Nawab Sir Khawaja Ahsanullah, KCSI.
b) Nawab Sir Khawaja Salimullah's grandfather was Nawab Sir Khawaja Abdul Gani, KCSI.

Khawaja Viqar Mohiuddin
Purana Paltan, Dhaka

Killers of Nuban Ahmed

Sir, The news item on demanding punishment of the culprits in Nuban's murder in your esteemed daily on 28 December 1996 has drawn my attention.

I would like to express my view about it. I draw the kind attention of our government on this issue.

If the killers of Bangabandhu can be caught from remote corners by our law enforcing agencies after 21 years, then what is the bar or problem to find out the killer of Nuban Ahmed — a bright teacher? Let all of us be honest to do

the justice. I urge upon the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to be little sympathetic to this case. It will be an interesting case and we will be able to know our society and people.

Azad Hossain
Ukilpara, Feni

Of processions

Sir, I became a victim to extreme humiliation by few of the BNP professionalists on 7 January, '97, at Kakrail. The incident occurred when my car, unfortunately, fell behind a truck, carrying the professional people.

Since the truck was for a while lacking much behind the other trucks and the remaining ones, carrying some more of them, were even further behind my car. Therefore, I took the opportunity to follow one truck. And for a while, I enjoyed being amongst them, by certainly not to Manik Mia avenue. Just because of being behind them, to my utter surprise they yelled out abusive words with vulgar gestures.

Anyway, I felt like picking up 10-inch brick to bash their heads but did not dare after noticing some more trucks behind. I told myself that all that grievance on the public is either due to the absolute rejection in the last election or they are yet to be guided by their top-brass leaders.

One thing came out clear: whatever respect I had for the BNP is gone, and I am sure that those who have noticed this, observe behaviour of their supporters will have the same feeling. The government should stop this forceful occupying of public places for meetings. On the other hand, BNP should be careful about their actions. Otherwise they may face a total rejection.

Noor ul Haque
Malibag Bazar, Dhaka

Publicity campaign for arsenic

Sir, In some districts of the country, ground water has been contaminated by arsenic. Many people are drinking that without knowing the bad effects. And the fate of them hangs on a thin balance. Very few literate persons of the victim-districts are aware of the poisonous effect of arsenic, but most of the poor people of those parts are not.

For this, the bad reaction would likely to emerge in a large scale among the people very soon.

In the meantime, we came to know that some experts from abroad are engaged in research-work, related to this. We hope that after the research-work, remedial measures would be taken on emergency basis.

But before that, to create extensive awareness among the common people, the information and public relations departments including other organisations concerned should come up with their publicity campaign.

Afsana Chowdhury Emry
S S Road, Shirdiganj

SAFTA: Need for Re-assessment

Bangladesh is a small country and the advantage of a small country model is that it can freely market any quality item it can produce in a competitive world. For marketing its product abroad, it doesn't have to be part of any bloc.

THE South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been in existence for the last eleven years now. It has certainly created an appropriate platform for promoting mutual understanding and co-operation in various areas among the member-countries. However, in the Sixth SAARC Summit held in Colombo in December 1991, when the leaders realised that their regional bloc had not achieved much compared to the other regional blocs especially the ASEAN group of countries in the areas of trade and commerce, they recommended the establishment of the South Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA) which was adopted in the Seventh SAARC Summit held in Dhaka in April 1993.

When the SAARC Council of Ministers met in New Delhi in December 1995, to celebrate the tenth year of its founding, they seemed to have been satisfied with the progress of SAPTA and proposed the establishment of the South Asian Free Trade (SAFTA), preferably by the year 2000. This has given the sense of rush, which one senses among the officials of some SAARC countries, to move from SAPTA to SAFTA in a matter of barely, four years from now. They may be trying to emulate

these, there are some new trading blocs emerging in recent years. The most important one is the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) including Canada, the United States and Mexico. Similarly, the ASEAN countries' Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) arrangement is another upcoming powerful bloc. The slowly developing SAPTA among the seven countries of the South Asian region seems to be the youngest among these new trading blocs. No one knows how long will these last, especially in the face of the powerful force of freer trade that is emerging in the global scene in the beginning of the next century.

From SAPTA to SAFTA

The decision to move from SAPTA to SAFTA by SAARC countries in a matter of four more years seems to be somewhat less well-thought out and unwise for Bangladesh since its economic implications have not been worked out fully by doing a thorough research. From the data available on the trading pattern between Bangladesh and the SAARC countries from 1984-85 to 1994-95, it is clear that Bangladesh's exports to the SAARC countries has declined from TK 2,452 million in 1984-85 to TK 2,331.7 in 1993-94 and marginally increased to TK 2,

general picture of Bangladesh's trade with India, the major country of the SAARC region. The bottom line of this analysis is that Bangladesh's trade with the SAARC countries, especially with India remains and will continue to remain unfavourable since India's demand for Bangladesh's export items is very limited.

In order to examine the prospects of trade with India two important measures should be worked out quantitatively. One of them is the "Cosine" estimates which will indicate the degree of complementarity of Bangladesh's trade with the SAARC region and with India, while the other is the measure of "Trade Intensity" which will indicate trade orientation of Bangladesh. Although these quantitative estimates haven't been done so far from Bangladesh's side, from a look at the pattern of trade flows to SAARC and other regions, one finds that Bangladesh's export trade has grown substantially over the last ten years or so, especially since 1991 after trade liberalisation in the world outside of the SAARC countries. The creation of SAFTA is supposed to divert this trade pattern of Bangladesh from the outside world to the SAARC countries through tariff concessions.



INSIGHT by Kabir U Ahmad

the ASEAN bloc of countries which has a time-frame of 15 years to accomplish such a goal. Before a country plunges into such a major trading re-arrangement which is going to affect its entire future through TRADE DIVERSION and TRADE CREATION, hence its entire economic development, it should carefully examine all aspects of such a rearrangement.

Creation and Destruction of Regional Blocs

The trading history of the world is littered with examples of creation, destruction and recreation of blocs, sometimes, for political reasons and at other times, for purely economic reasons. One most important example was that of the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) which consisted of Great Britain and North European countries in the 1950s. It was a counter to the EEC. But it has later vanished since Britain, the leader of the bloc, itself became a member of the EEC in the 1970s. Furthermore, Britain's present hesitancy in accepting the terms of European Monetary Union may leave Britain out of the EEC altogether. Another important example is that of COMECON among the East European countries which vanished after 1990 since the communist world itself has vanished. The Gulf Cooperating Council (GCC) among the six major oil-producing countries of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, has become inactive now. The Central American Free Trade Area does not exist now.

More close to the home ground, there was some kind of loose trading arrangement among the CENTO countries including Pakistan, Iran and Turkey in the decade of 1960 which has vanished for reasons known to everybody. As against

865 in 1994-95. This is taking place in spite of tariff concessions given to Bangladesh by the SAARC countries. The picture of trade with India is even worse. Bangladesh's exports to India in 1984-85 was TK 1,033 million which went down to TK 855 in 1993-94 and marginally increased in 1994-95 to TK 1,150 million.

On the other hand, Bangladesh's exports to North America (including Canada and the US) increased from TK 4,476 million in 1984-85 to TK 43,617 million in 1994-95, to Europe from TK 7,547 million in 1984-85 to TK 58,556 million in 1994-95, to East Asia from TK 3,316 million in 1984-85 to TK 12,439 million in 1994-95, to Australia and New Zealand from TK 867 million in 1984-85 to TK 790 million in 1994-95, and to Middle East from TK 3,961 million in 1984-85 to TK 6,362 million in 1994-95.

From these data, it can be seen that Bangladesh's largest export market is in Europe, the second largest market is in North America, the third largest market is in East Asia and the fourth largest market is in the Middle East while the fifth largest market is in Australia and New Zealand. Over these years, exports to these regions have grown annually by 87.45 per cent, 67.6 per cent, 27.5 per cent, 10.1 per cent and 6.06 per cent respectively. Compared to these rates, exports to India has grown by 1.13 per cent.

On the import side, Bangladesh's from India in 1980 was TK 2,224 million which increased to TK 19,440 million in 1994 registering a rate of growth of 55.3 per cent on an annual basis. This trade imbalance leaves a gap of about \$ 500 million in 1994. The cross border trade is another \$500 million per year. This is the

The question that should be answered by the policy makers of Bangladesh is whether SAARC countries will be able to absorb this volume of exports from Bangladesh. If one takes a close look at the 106 concessionary items given by India in the first round of negotiation, one finds that India's imports of these 106 items from within the SAARC countries is about Rs 327.1 million in 1994 compared to her total imports from SAARC countries being Rs 3,556 million which constitutes only 12 per cent of her total imports from SAARC. Further, one must also note that India's imports of these same 106 items from the outside world is much larger than its imports from within the SAARC countries.

One conclusion from these facts is immediate: there is no guarantee that even if SAFTA reduces tariffs on all export items of Bangladesh to zero, the SAARC countries may not be able to purchase all her exportable items; on the other hand, the imports of Bangladesh from the SAARC countries will continue to grow as they are now. This is the crux of the problem. What follows from this is that Bangladesh should continue to develop its trade link with the outside world, especially with countries which are growing faster and stay with SAFTA without joining SAFTA so that no major trade diversion takes place. The SAARC region is a slow-growing region and hence the trade creation will be smaller than in the faster growing regions of the world.

While concluding, one final point should be made. Bangladesh is a small country and the advantage of a small country model is that it can freely market any quality item it can produce in a competitive world. For marketing its product abroad, it doesn't have to be part of any bloc.

"Information Beggars" Emerge as 21st Century's Concern

by Juan L Mercado

The fledgling Healthnet Satellite network now links up parts of Asia and 15 African nations. Weekly, it "downloads" to doctors in isolated areas latest research from 20 medical journals. It reinforced doctors when the "ebola" epidemic erupted.

INFORMATION poverty could be the 21st century's most pernicious form of deprivation. And this penury of a fast approaching future could well determine which countries will grow — and which may wither.

This stark "cyberspace" choice was sketched out in a 1996 United Nations Development Programme analysis entitled: *Technology Revolution Study*.

Today's information revolution is symbolized by the satellite disk, Internet and optic fiber. It is interlocking with an explosive growth in knowledge, notes the study's author, Has D'Orville of UNDP technology task force.

Both revolutions are global waves, affecting all countries and respecting no boundaries," the study notes. The new information technology is radically altering economies and social organizations. "This trend can not be checked or reversed."

marginalized by obsolete and inadequate telecom infrastructures. "This information poverty is complicated by the emergence of a new information elitism," D'Orville writes. "Developing countries are threatened by domination, marginalization and exclusion" from the radical changes crucial for breaking out of economic stagnation.

Three factors drive the information revolution at ever higher rates of change, the UNDP report asserts. These are: swift technological change; skyrocketing levels of performance; reduction in costs. The "chip's" (microprocessor) capacity, for example, doubles yearly while costs plummet by a third, the report notes.

At the root of the emerging "information poverty" are the stark disparities in telecommunications infrastructure.

In Singapore, for example, there are 378 telephones for every 1,000 persons. The comparative figure for Bangladesh is two telephones. Shabby training results in one telecom worker servicing 18 lines — 12% of the world average. Over one million people, in the poorer countries, have applied for a phone line.

If this gap persists, many of the lagging countries could be shut out from the wide range of 21st century applications that are now emerging, the UNDP report notes.

These new "configurations" range from the better known "tele-conferencing" to multi-

media assisted long distance education, provision of health care to isolated areas through "tele-medicine" and "tele-banking."

Today, 1.5 billion children and adults are illiterate. But education has remained inert and "marginally affected by the technological and information revolutions." Harnessing these systems for the poorest is a major 21st century challenge.

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But governments will have to pour in far more resources, manpower and legislative support to construct telecom structures than they have done so far. "The losers will be those who stand still and watch," the study adds.

The information revolution will reinforce democratic trends and affect authoritarian regimes of varying shades in Asia and elsewhere. The "infobahn" can broaden political debate, foil censors and broaden participation of people.

Not even the most repressive regime can stop human beings from finding ways of communicating and obtaining access to information, the report adds. The cyberspace "highway may well run the risk of delivering an information aristocracy rather than a digital democracy." — DEPTHnews