

A Visit to Tehran

The economy has been badly hit by the excesses of Islamic revolution on the one hand and the 8-year-long war against Iraq on the other. The nation still carries scars of the past. Both President Akbar Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Akbar Valeyati realise this. But they are surrounded by difficulties.

COMPARED to Delhi, Tehran is an ashram, austere and ascetic. No late night, no gay dresses, no TV dishes, not even a touch of ostentatiousness. Life, like the traffic, flows silently. Yet, 23 years ago when I visited Tehran last to interview the Shah, the city expressed itself in fancy and looked a showy part of western world. At that time, Tehran was dotted with loud music parlours, neon-lit hoardings and crime-ridden streets.

The Islamic revolution that the late Imam Khomeini brought about has changed Iran and helped it find some of its old traditions and cultural moorings. It has acquired an identity. No doubt, an over dose of fundamentalism has roughed up the society and women have been forced to wear black robes and head covers. But they continue to use cosmetics, drive cars and walk on the streets till late in the evening. The mullah still counts but to a lesser degree than before.

There is yet no dissent, no free press, no democracy in the sense we know. The society is controlled and there are more policemen in plain clothes than in uniform. Then there are volunteers to watch. But the revolution regime was no better and the disappearance of staunch critics is nothing new. Yet, people look more relaxed, more secure and more intent on sharing the future.

Iran's main problem is that the half of its six-core population is below the age of 25. Most of its youth is either unemployed or under-employed. Islam gives them faith, not food. The economy has been badly hit by the excesses of Islamic revolution on the one hand and the 8-year-long war against Iraq on the other. The nation still carries scars of the past. Both President Akbar Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Akbar Valeyati realise this. But they are surrounded by difficulties. Their plans for recur have been hamstrung by America's hostility.

No meaningful development is possible without the west, particularly America, admits a top policy-framer. Still he cannot discuss, much less advocate, normal relations with the US, which is considered an enemy, not so much by people as by government. In fact, the word, America, is

taboo. Tehran could have looked for support from neighbours. But it shares nothing with them except Islam. Hence it is seeking ties well beyond its shores.

India fits into that scenario and foreign minister Inder Gujral's successful visit to Iran assumes importance. But can India or, for that matter, a coalition of China, India, Central Asia and Russia, about which Tehran talks, stand it in good stead when even Germany and France, once showing interest in Iran, have distanced themselves? Trade between India and Iran has increased by 50 per cent in the last one year. Tehran has asked New Delhi to set up a railways workshop to

retrieve some 100 American-made locomotives, which are not in use for want of spare parts.

A joint fertiliser plant will come up with the guarantee that New Delhi will buy the entire production. Another joint venture, a bank, the first ever in Iran, will be founded to finance private entrepreneurs. And India, Iran and Turkistan have signed an agreement which will enable both Iran and India to reach through Turkistan Central Asia, Russia and other countries of the old Soviet Union.

All this is not more than a few drops in the ocean. Iran's needs are vast and immediate, far more than a developing country or a coalition can meet. It has to have America on its side. But may explain why Iran does not go all out to help the Rabbani government in Afghanistan. Washington has warned Tehran privately. Iran is scared to annoy America further.

You are not helping the anti-Taliban forces enough," I said during an impromptu conversation with Valeyati before the dinner in honour of Gujral. He vehemently denied any assistance to the Rabbani government. "Our help," he said, "is only moral." (The word is so familiar in our part of the world.) He attacked Pakistan and America which, he said,

dia is respected for its pluralistic society and the institutions it has built. It finds "more freedom" in Pakistan, and expects New Delhi to retrieve the situation in Afghanistan as well. But Tehran's difficulties are not strategic. Even if they were, an equation with the Arab world would have been the answer. Nor is it obsessed any more with Islam's pre-eminence.

Tehran feels satisfied that the revolution it effected within the country has had an impact in the entire Muslim world. It finds that the religion has become more important than before in Egypt and Jordan and that more staunch Muslims have been elected to parliament in Algeria and Sudan.

How does the country have economic leaps despite America's embargo is the challenge Iran faces today. In the absence of western assistance, it sees more benefit by expanding ties with Central Asia and beyond than with the countries in the south, including India. Tehran realises that development will be slow and limited. Still it hopes that its cultural renaissance may make up for the economic deficiencies.

Culturally, it is tugged by India. The Iranians seek kinship between the two countries. And in the long run, they believe that the common features in the two cultures will lead to

supplied arms to the Taliban. Valeyati's criticism of Pakistan was in sharp contrast to what the Shah's foreign minister Khalatbani told me in 1974: "Iran has more commitment towards Pakistan than India."

Today, the Iranians feel quite sour towards Islamabad. I was in Tehran when some ultras attacked the Iranian cultural centre in Multan and killed six persons. Although the official line was that the "killings were of outsiders" hostility to "Iran," accusing America without naming it, yet an average Iranian felt that Iran-Pakistan relationship is in for further battering.

That will make Iran tilt towards New Delhi still more. In the identity of interests. It will help them economically as well, particularly when India favours a proposal to lay a pipeline from Iran to India and beyond for the use of gas.

Since the entire make up of Iran from hoary past has been based on relations with Arab countries and the west, it will need all the efforts to look eastward. Iran has to articulate the thesis that it is part of Asia, not the Middle-East. Many ideologues believe so and argue that Iran has tried the Arabs again and again and has found them wanting.

Still they cannot run away from geography even if they find themselves historically closer to Asians. Also, they cannot run away from the fact that the west alone is in opposition to bale them out of economic difficulties. Tehran's annual growth rate is 1.8 per cent. In a way the nation faces the same dilemma as most women in Tehran do: wearing a black eastern robe over a western outfit. America may ask for the freedom of choice if and when it decides to normalise relations with Iran.

Even if the political leadership were to agree, the clergy would not. Ayatollah Mohammed Yazdi, head of Iranian judiciary, and the religious top like him may fear that economic considerations will ultimately undo the gains of Islamic revolution. They can't build an avalanche of people's protest. Political leaders are not powerful enough to stem it.

The situation in Iran looks a settled one. But its market-places also go through Tinanman Squares. So far the way has never clogged because there has been no clash between government and the youth. Economic compulsions and the right to differ can destroy the seemingly peaceful atmosphere.

Dhaka Day by Day

Be Bangalee and Promote Deshi Product

by Ayesha Fariha



For the past few weeks Dhaka has been oohing and aahing over the arrival of Benetton in the city. One hears comments like, "Have you seen the new Benetton? It is really something!" or "Just imagine, we can buy Benetton in Bangladesh!" Yes, it is easy to imagine. In front of the outlet one can see scores of cars coming and going, cars belonging to excited, animated faces.

On the heels of Benetton, Hallmark has come in; and once again there is a lot of excitement and in front of Hallmark one can see a great buzz of activity too.

Dhaka's craze for foreign products seems to be growing every day, and though it is hard to justify, it is understandable. What with the influence of cable television, and the fact that a lot of Bangladeshis make frequent trips abroad, it should not come as a surprise that a lot of people in our city crave a Westernised lifestyle. What is a source of amazement is that the locals are just not motivated to cater to the demand for Westernised products. They just sit back and sing plaudits when

ever a foreign company comes into the country. It seems no one wants to face the fact that a company comes from abroad to make money in Bangladesh, not to beautify the cities. They prefer to believe that the more 'deshi' names they can drop, the more developed and sophisticated Dhaka becomes in the eyes of the rest of the world.

What excuse can Bangladeshis have for not producing what they themselves wish to buy? Consider articles of clothing, it cannot be skill; otherwise this country would not have such a thriving garments sector. In terms of cards, it cannot be talent because there are many, clever artists in this country, and there are also many people who can think up "cute" lines in English and in Bengali if they really tried.

The answer is simple. Bangladeshis do not buy their own products and promote them, instead they are proud to use and possess foreign products. Until a "Made in Bangladesh" label becomes a source of national pride, our country will never have the ability to produce its own Benetons and Hallmarks.

The Law Must Take its Own Course

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

THE president of the Indian National Congress, octogenarian Sitaram Kesri is now under investigation of CBI. This is being done on the allegation that the successor of the former Indian Premier and Congress President P V Narasimha Rao, is living beyond his means. That means that the life-style of this old man has not been consistent with his normal income or known earnings. Mr Kesri was reported to have been under interrogation of CBI official for hours together between January 19-20, 1997. These are only preparatory exercises of the law-enforcing agency and in consideration of the personal demand very careful scrutiny before formal charges were framed.

And though the intriguing matter relates to the most leader of the party, the Indian National Congress as such has not shown so far any violent reaction. The party spokesman Mr Gadgil has, however, expressed his anger over the news that the present coalition government of Deve Gowda has allegedly deployed Indian Intelligence for shadowing INC Headquarters. The Government has categorically denied the allegation terming it a cock and bull story. It has argued that the government of H D Deve Gowda realized that the support of INC MPs in the Lok Sabha to the Government was essential for its survival and that it would be an act of stupidity to cause annoyance to Congress.

Nevertheless, the leaders of the Indian National Congress have so far remained non-committal on the alleged involvement of their president. They would, however, moot out the situation and decide on the next course of action.

It is an irony that little over a month only that Sitaram Kesri took over the party presidency and later the leadership of the Parliamentary party — both from P V Narasimha Rao. It may be recalled that Rao was not at all willing to step down from either, being pampereed by some members belonging to corruption, nepotism and favouritism lodged against Rao and the consequential rigmarole he had to pass through personal appearance bogged down his spirit and moral. So, he gave in and Kesri was elected the party president.

Subsequent to his taking over, Sitaram Kesri moved swiftly and cohesively around to consolidate his powers. In this he got positive support from all. Even those who were at loggerheads with Rao and parted with the party came back to Kesri's call. During such hectic activities, ostensibly to re-energize the party, a sort of halo was created around Kesri to say that an honest but humble person like him was the ideal one for party presidency. And at Kesri's insistence, following a close review of the party image, Rao tendered his resignation from the leadership of the Parliamentary party where too Sitaram Kesri was unanimously elected as Rao's replacement.

The old man was apparently going ahead on firm steps never knowing nor anticipating that close by his heels there was the shadow of the law to at least temporarily cut short his strides forward. The present insinuating news of his incom-

erous cases against some of the leaders and colleagues, have been intermittently vocal, the imputed persons have so far remained significantly mum. Obviously they are not prepared to defend themselves as now or they do not want to antagonize the law enforcing agency with words that might prejudice their own cases. This may not, however, be mistaken for their respecting the Rule of Law. They consider it as politically motivated. None has so far been able to say boldly that he/she was open to scrutiny as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has most emphatically declared recently.

By now, we have had ample instances where the present government has shown its absolute impartiality in conducting the affairs of the law enforcing agencies. True to her announcement earlier in this regard the PM and her Home Minister Rafiqul Islam, Bir Uttam have so far faithfully ensured that the hoodlums, irrespective of their party affiliations, were hauled up. In the process BCL and Jubo League boys have also been taken into police custody without any discrimination whatsoever. Still then, the opposition leaders have been hounding on the old string of "Awami repression" of BNP boys. Prior to the current 4-point accord that facilitated BNP MPs return to the Jatiya Sangsad, their 10-point charter of demand (squeezed to 3-point immediately after it was placed before the Speaker) contained similar charge among others. The party in power, precisely the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, herself invited the BNP leadership to specify the names of their party members who have been put behind the bars on false and fictitious grounds. She assured that a proper and thorough investigation would be undertaken to find if any innocent BNP activist was in police custody. If yes, he would be released forthwith.

The list invited by the government is yet to come. Most vocal secretary general of BNP Abul Mannan Bhuiyan, on the other hand, continues playing the old record of "repression". His silence on the 'list' is very much understandable. He, however, appears to be abhorred by the 'spectre' of a re-emerging "BAKSAL" alluding to the government by consensus" of Sheikh Hasina.

The nation observed the Chittagong Mass Killing Day on January 24, 1997. Twenty-seven persons were gunned down on this day in 1988 at the direct order of the erstwhile Police Commissioner Rakibul Huda. We recall that Begum Zia also condemned the killing and demanded exemplary punishment for the Commissioner. But she forgot it altogether when in power, evaluated the 'great efficiency' of the very Police Commissioner and eventually promoted him. And to reciprocate he again ruthlessly beat the journalists getting his men within national Press Club premises. This happened during Khaleida Zia's last days. The case against Huda filed by an Advocate of Chittagong but did not come up for Begum Zia's intervention, has been revived. Rakibul Huda is now in jail to face trial. The trials of the killers of Bangabandhu and four national leaders now appear ready. But BNP appears to be somewhat scared these days as some hitherto unknown but unpleasant stories may become public when the court proceeds.

Not Convincing

BNP chief Khaleida Zia yesterday aired the call for a countrywide agitation on March 3 as an official launching of sort of her party's anti-government programmes. Although the announcement preceded by a trail of almost rabid resentment hardly springs any surprise on its arrival, the rationale or the apparent absence of it behind the loud and passionate appeal for agitation does take us aback.

We are not sure if it is the mounting pressure within her party to do something for a more felt political presence or some other reason that has compelled the BNP chief to remind the nation of the days of political confrontation. Because the reasons given by Begum Zia for the programme do not quite convince us. In fact, a lot of what she and her party have uttered in condemnation of the present government seem to have their roots in prejudice and a myopic predetermination to pay the party in power back in its own coin rather than a discreet and genuine survey of the reality.

Have we really experienced any deterioration in the socio-economic context to invite such a disruptive prospect? Agreed, the performance of the government regarding law and order has been far from satisfactory but then is not BNP itself gearing up to contribute to the further complication of the situation?

Similar note of contradiction is there in the party's stock of country's economic situation. How can they ever try to make sense by observing that while the farmers are not getting just price for produces, price of essentials is going up. There is no way the two observations can be true simultaneously. If the price of rice is a general and principal component in the price index of essentials then there is hardly any ground yet on which BNP can base its agitation. Its criticism of Awami League in this connection is nothing but a trick of thriving in fear psychology. By constantly harping on the bugaboo of famine it is only trying to hide its present non performance as a party aware of its responsibility.

BNP's stance on the Ganges Water Treaty is also emblematic of its vow to remain as the prisoners of past rather than to reach out for facts and reality. In order to keep an issue of such immense significance out of political acrimony, we want to invite the government for an immediate step to keep the political parties and people informed and updated on the situation. Instead of yearning for political mileage by jeopardising national interests, BNP would do well to justify its presence as a major party by playing a constructive role in the parliament.

Improving Jail Condition

Acute accommodation problem in Chittagong Jail, as reported in this newspaper yesterday, can only be compared to a time bomb waiting to burst any moment. When a jail with a capacity for accommodating 747 inmates is crammed with 3,000 to 4,000 of them—five times the capacity, even the sheer lack of breathing space can be dangerous both psychologically and physically for them. No wonder that 90 per cent of the prisoners are suffering from some kind of skin or other infectious diseases. Such a sub-human condition in the jail should be considered a clear violation of the inmates' rights. No state or government can or should be guilty of such gross negligence and violation of the minimum basic rights the prisoners must enjoy.

Such deprivation and denial of rights are what exactly led to the revolt in the Jessore Jail some months back. We presume the condition is not likely to be any better in other jails of the country. Quite clearly, this situation has been prevailing for a long time now. The occasional rebellious outbursts are only a natural consequence. It is rather surprising that the prisoners with their kinds of record put up with the condition they have been subjected to. The authority must realise that most of the jail revolts are a protest against the inhuman treatment and abject living condition in jails.

The incident in Jessore Jail should be an eye-opener for the government. What successive governments have neglected, this one should take up with urgency. We understand that it is not easy to build new jails or expand the capacity of the existing ones but we also refuse to accept any excuse that the job is beyond our means. It is plain and simple that the jails constructed more than 100 years ago are too inadequate to meet the present need of a much larger population. The problem is the lack of focus on this issue. What about the politicians who have spent sometime in prison, are they satisfied with the jail condition? That the inmates cannot advocate their case should not be a cause for relegating it to the back burner. Make necessary funds available for construction and development of jails before it is too late. Don't tell us the inmates will have to resort to rebellious means to bring their case into focus.

Case for Vendors

The evicted vendors from the city's footpath are going to get their chances back to sell commodities from only designated areas and on holidays. The Dhaka City Corporation has come up with this temporary relief for the vendors. One would ask why the measure could not be taken before their eviction. Yet we welcome the decision —one that has come somewhat late but looks promising. It must be said that the measure is yet to be an alternative to proposed places for their permanent business. The sooner they can get their business back to their brisk shape the better.

Till that happens, we must refer to our earlier suggestions that on weekend or week days, a whole stretch of roads or avenues can be assigned for such vending business by blocking the area to vehicles subject to the rush of traffic. The system is in operation in many cities of developed countries—particularly in Paris such markets have earned tremendous popularity. Let this be introduced in our capital with time limits. We suggest that the ward commissioners be given responsibility to manage such markets of their respective areas.

The points that need to be stressed are: a) that the markets must close within the stipulated time; b) no permanent or semi-permanent structures will be allowed to be constructed damaging the road or pavement; c) the vendors will have to clean up the garbage they produce there. Bodies like the market associations may also be given the responsibility of management and clean-up.

To the Editor...

Cricketers' pet names

Sir, I have read with great interest the article by The Animateur in the sports page of your esteemed daily on 25th February, 1997. I wholeheartedly agree with the views of your writer on the present state of TV/Radio commentary on cricket.

Among other things, the point I would like to elaborate on is the use of pet names of the Bangladeshi players. It is time we should realise that our cricket has been elevated to the international level from the confines of the club houses. Our players are now exposed to global media and they should be known by their proper names as in the case of cricketers of all other test-playing and ICC-affiliated countries.

In fact, I would suggest that both the electronic and print media should make it a habit to refrain from using pet names with immediate effect. I would request the Ministry of Information to send the necessary signal to TV and Radio authorities to instruct the commentators accordingly.

May I also suggest that The Daily Star also give the lead to other newspapers by declaring its policy to address the Bangladeshi cricket players only by their proper names. In fact, you may launch a campaign on this issue.

Overall, it would be appropriate if Bangladesh Cricket Board does away with pet names at all levels of our domestic cricket to ingrain and imbibe the habit of calling our players by their proper names. I hope somebody will heed my humble advice.

A Z Khan, Former Member of BCCB

Bangladesh-India trade and friendship

Sir, It appears that some Indian traders are minting gold from our each and every market and bazar in urban and rural areas. The entire country is flooded with Indian goods and commodities.

While the official export from India to Bangladesh amounts to Taka 3000 crore per year, our export to India stands at a paltry sum of Taka 200 crore annually.

Further, in addition to Indian export of Taka 3000 crore it is reported that varieties of goods and commodities including beautiful sarees and harmful Phensidil syrup worth over Taka 5000 crore are being smuggled into our country from India every year.

On the contrary, a huge quantity of foreign goods and commodities including powdered milk, second hand winter clothes, medicine, electronics, small equipment and machinery and automobile spare parts etc., which we import from the USA, UK, Japan, China and other countries at the cost of billions of taka are allegedly being smuggled out of our country to India.

Thus, day by day the economy of our country is getting ru-

ined, the exchange rate of our Taka with US Dollar is decreasing and the production in our mills and factories are stagnated.

We would request our Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to kindly hold a combined enquiry into these matters. We should take immediate stringent measures to stop smuggling of goods from Bangladesh and India. Mutual trust and cordial relation between Bangladesh and India are imperative in the greatest interest of amity and welfare of the peoples of two sovereign and neighbouring countries.

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Belated DU exams

Sir, Shifting of examination dates by the universities has become a fashion nowadays. Master degree (traditional) examination of the Dhaka University is scheduled to begin from 27th February '97. But in recent notice the Dhaka University authority was postponed the scheduled exam in order to give chance to those candidates who got third class or failed in Honours (traditional) examination to appear for improvement. The authorities should have thought this issue before making the Masters exam programme. Before making the Masters exam programme, they could hold the 'improvement examination' more than once, if necessary.

Besides, normally they take at least one year to publish the results. It seems that the university authority cannot take proper decision. They are not at all concerned about the wastage of time, money, energy and anxiety of the students. As a result of delay in holding examinations and publishing results, the students cannot apply for jobs, married female students cannot go abroad with their husbands and many other such problems arise.

The Dhaka University should immediately hold the Masters final exam and publish the results within three months to mitigate the sufferings of the students and guardians.

Tareq Ahmed, 52, Uttar Mugdapara, Dhaka

Independence of Judiciary

Sir, It surely is a noble attempt being undertaken by our 7th parliament to separate the judiciary from the executive. In other words, we are going to have the judiciary independent. While we must consider the move to be in the right direction, we should again ponder whether this alone would be sufficient to establish rule of law and justice in our society. A strong judiciary capable of establishing justice makes itself the spine of the social body which we call a nation. Absence of such an institution would surely make the nation collapse. Independence of judi-

ciary, though vital and important, is not the only criterion which will establish a just system. We need somewhat more. In this respect, I would like to draw the attention of our law makers to the saying of one of the great statesmen the human civilization has produced so far. He is our 4th Khalifa Hazrat Ali. Khalifa Ali wrote some 1400 years before to his governor in Egypt, Malik Ashtar.

Quote "Select for you chief judge one from the people who is by far the best among them — one who is not obsessed with domestic worries, one who cannot be intimidated, one who does not err too often, one who does not turn back from the right path once he finds it, one who is not self-concerned or avaricious, one who will not decide before knowing full facts, one who will weigh with care every attendant doubt and pronounce a clear verdict after considering everything into full consideration, one who will not grow restive over the arguments of advocates and who will examine with patience every new disclosure of facts and who will be strictly impartial in his decision, one whom flattery cannot mislead or one who does not exult over his position. But it is not easy to find such men."

Once you have selected the right man for the office, pay him handsomely enough to let him live in comfort and in keeping with his position, enough to keep him above temptations. Give him a position in your court so high that none can even dream of envying it and so high that neither backbiting nor intrigue can touch him." Unquote.

It is quite obvious that corruption has penetrated to every nook and corner of our social organ. Though we still have some element in the judiciary to be proud of, we cannot say with absolute certainty that it has remained untouched by the all engulfing virus that has reached every other part of our social body. Having an honest and upright judiciary is the prime need of today should we intend to improve our standard to that of a civilised nation.

Our law makers should handle the subject with this comprehensive aim in view. Attempt of piecemeal solution would not be enough.

A Citizen, Dhaka

Microcredit Summit and Sheikh Hasina

Sir, Mr Kabir U Ahmed in his article Microcredit Summit and Professor Younus has carefully avoided the name of Sheikh Hasina who inaugurated the Summit, and chaired both the opening and closing sessions. She also received the declaration of the Summit. Mr Kabir also linked the 74 famine with Grameen Bank. He also forgot to mention that the only speaker who mentioned the name of Dr Younus in her speech is Sheikh Hasina.

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