

## On the Cutting Edge

Pompous words are out of place with economic groupings. The latter are a matter of pure practicalities involving collective political will of the countries desirous of floating them, identification of a common range of interests and getting a mechanism in place for interactive cooperation on a triangular or quadrangular basis. Passing all these stages at a break-neck speed, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand have formed a new economic bloc styled BISTEC which seems packed with potentialities across a swathe of sectors ranging from tourism and transport to agriculture and human resources development.

What is discernible here is a certain visionary aplomb shown by the four countries of two neighbouring regions — South Asia and Southeast Asia — to establish tangible inter-regional linkages for the first time in the modern history of the Asian continent. There had been trade between the two regions in the yore but hardly with any investments in the tow, far less technology-sharing which has been of recent origins. There ought to be a cause for exultation among the architects of BISTEC that they have the unique distinction of laying a bridge between the SAARC and the ASEAN in concrete terms. With Myanmar getting an observer status to the new economic bloc and hopefully to be taken aboard eventually by its display of a certain political maturation down the road, there is the vision of a virtually connective overland contiguity from Sri Lanka through India, Bangladesh and Myanmar to Thailand.

It is like a triple glory for Bangladesh: this is a second feather to her cap after having pioneered SAARC; she gets Sri Lanka by her side, a SAARC partner she could not tie up with for obvious reasons under the South Asian Growth Quadrangle on the eastern flank of SAARC; and Thailand and Myanmar emerge on the horizon for her, too.

Two developments on a truly Asian scale are taking place very rapidly and auspiciously to favour of the launch and evolution of BISTEC. Both the ASEAN and SAARC are poised to become free trade areas by 2003 and the ESCAP study in Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) are in an advance stage of completion.

## Indo-Pak Camaraderie

Nawaz Sharif now in his second term of office as Pakistan's prime minister appears to be a transformed leader. And nowhere is his transformation so manifest as in his approach to relations with India. Indeed, the thaw noticed in the relations between the two South Asian giants after the change in leaderships on both sides gives the indication that there might be a real breakthrough around the corner. Sharif, true to his new leadership role, has of late come up with a proposal for mutual cuts in the two country's defence budgets. Quite a refreshing approach to ending hostility between the two nations bedevilled by a host of social and economic issues of their own.

Now here is a Pakistani leader who has enough guts to admit how haemorrhagic the continued animosity between the two neighbours has been. He has also been very quick to identify the opportunities and benefits to be derived from a cordial and co-operative relationship between the two countries. Sharif has indeed been very pragmatic in his suggestion. The two nations charting so long a course of confrontation, have arrived at a point where they must abandon expenditures of enormous sums on defence — the firepower of which is mainly targeted at each other. At a time when expenditure on armament the world over is drastically coming down in favour of socio-economic agenda, Sharif's latest proposal might be the beginning of a new era — one that will be marked by an exploitation of the region's full potential.

If we go by the history of the two countries' hostile relations, we discern a very injurious influence stemming from them to handicap any regional co-operative venture. That the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) could not bring about any substantially meaningful co-operation in the past owes largely to this bitter relationship. Today's reality has changed, so the leaders of the region should set their visions far and wide. Nawaz Sharif's counterpart across the border, Inder Kumar Gujral is also the likeliest person to respond positively to the former's offer. A process is already on with his active backing to bridge the gap in a number of areas of their bilateral relations. Let the two leaders lead their nations to a mutually understanding, beneficial and enduring relationship.

## Be Focused

The problem with any serious campaign against drug abuse has been the unwieldy multiplicity of concerns and anxieties needing to be addressed simultaneously. The long list of imperatives included breaking drug rings in and out of the country, building public awareness through the media and NGOs, updating anti-drug laws, revitalising a degenerate value system, restoring parental authority in the families and setting up reformatory or specialised hospital facilities for the addicted many in our society.

Our preferred order priority in the crusade against drug trafficking and addiction is as follows: (a) not only as part of, but also in addition to the globally and regionally prescribed formulae, we must mount vigorous national policing to cut off supplies to the wholesale and retail drug networks within our borders; (b) in each municipal or rural ward there should be a community-level anti-drug committee comprising the local government representative, teacher, Imam of the mosque or other socially influential persons, their job being primarily to sensitise local youths against the malady; (c) the committee could make use of appropriate slides, documentaries, from time to time; and audio-visual broadcasts and newspaper reports and features; (d) there must be community-level debates on the issues involved as a complement to the awareness-building process started by the Bangladesh Anti-drug Federation of NGOs at the national level.

Finally, let's have specialised treatment centres in the capital city and all the divisional headquarters.

# Can the Degradation of Dhaka City be Arrested?

Getting back to the processes of growth, decay and regeneration of cities in general, one has to point out that a city develops in a particular region or space where economic activities, with or without political power, are concentrated attracting professionals, entrepreneurs and labour force of all kinds from distant areas.

## Growth, Degradation and Regeneration of Cities

Although many important facts and statistics were presented at the seminar on the degradation aspect of the city, for long-term solution it is important that the processes of growth, degradation and regeneration of cities in general have to be brought to the forefront so that policy makers as well as the dwellers themselves understand their roles and responsibilities about their future. The mistake of Dhaka city planners in the past was that there was no comprehensive long-term plan of the city. Most of the facilities were developed in a piece-meal and haphazard fashion. Otherwise, how could one explain that huge city of about 8 million people with the prospect of adding another 5 million in the next 10 years or so with a centre of a huge government as well as business, banking and commercial activities developed without covered garage parking facilities, speed control systems of traffic, appropriate link roads between eastern and western parts of the city, and express ways to bypass the city traffic? Similarly, how could a city developed in a monsoon-dominated country without proper water drainage system? How could it neglect the most basic civic necessity of garbage collection and disposal

very fast and is almost becoming uninhabitable. However, there are still some conceptual and planning issues that need to be addressed.

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system? How could it develop a city without sufficient clean water supplies to its dwellers? How could it allow the diesel burning engines on the roads? Many similar questions can be raised to support the above proposition. However, the city authorities still do not seem to understand, let alone taking any actions on, the most hazardous implications of these issues on the life of the city-dwellers.

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newer areas. Facilities in the old centre deteriorate and improve in the new centre and peripheries. If nothing is done to improve the facilities in the old centre and peripheries, most of the economic activities and the ancillary services move out of these areas turning these into almost abandoned areas. In the western countries, this is not allowed. There are constant urban redevelopment and improvement activities undertaken by public authorities

Shridhewari and Magbazar areas which were developed in the decade of 1950s. In less than 50 years, these housing areas have deteriorated almost beyond recognition and there is no perceptible improvement activities. Even in the more newly-developed areas like Bonani, Gulshan and Bandhara, there are squatters all around and the garbage collection and disposal systems are appalling. Incidentally, what is most striking is that the country does not have a good sense of maintenance anywhere. For this, one can go and see the government and semi-government office buildings etc., vis-a-vis the foreign bank and office buildings in the city.

These raise the question whether as the population continues to grow both by birth and migration to the city can be extended further north or northeast. Is there land space to keep expanding the city in these directions? If there is, then at what cost? These issues need to be raised now to take care of the problems that are going to come up in the next 10 years or so such that the next phase of city development is based on better planning and not on haphazard and ad-hoc decisions.

## The Rural-Urban Migration Problem

In the process of city development, the migration of rural unemployed to the cities in search of jobs is a critical issue. Apart from rapidly degrading the city facilities and urban environment, the high rate of

## INSIGHT

by Kabir U Ahmad

## OPINION

# Vision of an Expanding University

Dr Abul Kalam

The university statutory as well as non-statutory bodies, the VC was always extremely popular with his folks for his bold, candid and vigorous pursuit of issues he committed himself to. Like many of his colleagues in the university he was also highly politically inclined, having been a distinguished member of the Awami League's Advisory Council, a position he gave up on being elected to the university's top executive position. At that point, he committed himself to neutrality, as far as the dividing spectrum of politics was concerned. Such a stance was quite well-received in various circles. The VC is also widely known as a well-meaning person, a good soul, is widely acclaimed for his human sense of empathy and understanding. This sort of qualities are indeed scarce commodities in a society like ours, but they tend to get diluted in some momentary blunders and undesired mistakes prompted by interested circles.

About financial aspects, the DU VC informed "that the Japanese government had assured of financial and technological help for establishment of the centre for science and technology", but did not say anything about funding possibilities of other ambitious projects. The University of Dhaka is not a "state within a state" and has no charter to get into financial arrangement with a foreign government to implement its schemes of expansion.

However, to the extent the VC articulated his vision of expansion of the university would impress the readership, especially his constituents at the University of Dhaka. The VC, perhaps as the youngest Chief Executive of the university in his elected tenure position and with a very bright career, is certainly entitled to have his dream and vision of expansion of the university which he is heading. He also has every right to share those with his colleagues in the university as well as with the public in general. What really concerns one is the timing of publicizing his projected vision. There is similar concern about the procedure he chose to spell out what blueprint of development and expansion he has in his vision.

The DU VC was already a celebrity of sort in the country before being elected to his present position. One of the highest vote-catchers in the elections to

warded a week earlier, with some additional items being distributed at the entry-point on the day — all on a sudden circulated to the members of the august body a 4-page proposal captioned "The development programmes of Dhaka University." Coming as it did only four days ahead of the DU Senate elections, the document drew instant reactions in the illustrious body, because such a lopsided proposal may have but one motivation: to influence the DU Senate elections. Understandably, the VC saw the rationale behind adverse reactions and swiftly he withdrew his document envisioning his development programme.

While the document envisioning the VC's proposals for expansion of the university already circulated among the distinguished members of the Academic Council, remained with them for their reflections, political or otherwise, the VC in an apologetic fashion placed his document back under the folder, but the essence of the content had indeed been unfolded at an "opportunity moment", as it reappeared under a first page-headline in an esteemed daily of the country in the very morning of DU Senate election! It seems in allowing himself to fall prey to a momentary gain of political process, the VC unfortunately even failed to address his conscience whether it was right to do so.

Elections in this country have been subject to more controversy than perhaps anywhere in the world. And even the introduction of a caretaker system of government for conducting elections did not help alleviate suspicions about the conduct and process of elections. In a centre of learning such as the University of Dhaka, which has the largest concentration of intellectual luminaries in the country, it is not expected that one would clamour for a caretaker administration for overseeing elections. There is already a great deal of disillusionment over the university community being excessively politicized.

The recent DU Senate election was also reportedly marked by "dirty tricks" of an extreme order. A group of six zealous, believably representing a vested circle based in Katabon, is known to have infiltrated and planted itself in

above-mentioned amenities, the "namaz" will be hampered. Islam is the state religion. And it is the duty of the government to facilitate the performing of the religious rituals. That's why, when Mr Iqbal writes, "It will be a TOTAL loss if government allows water and electricity free for the mosques" — the inanity of the remark, saddens me. Total loss and gain is not always measured by financial profits. It was never conceived by the letter-writer that sometimes may be more important than money!

Adnan R. Amin  
Dhanmondi

## Sub-regional Grouping

Sir, Mr Rezaul Karim's write-up on the above issue was very enlightening (*The Daily Star*, Jan. 30). The points made by him deserve serious consideration by our government leaders who seem to be rushing for hasty decisions.

With her record of tactical measures to tame small neighbours, it is evident that India is

House Tutors who are appointed by him, in the position of the Deans and members of the Syndicate and Senate, most of whom are elected, in the Chairmen whose position rotates. The university has also all kinds of functional mechanisms, starting from the departmental academic committees to the academic council to help him formulate ideas and shape his vision.

Certainly, there are excellent ideas in his document which deserve serious reflection. However, it is a matter of pity and surprise that the VC, as he told his colleagues in the Academic Council on 24 May 1997, had spent a few hours the night before for computation of his ideas into a document for expansion of the university, whereas a proposal for expansion of the Department of International Relations into a faculty has been lying in his office for the last few years and not a single word has been said about the proposal in his document for academic expansion!

This is just a case in point: there is little coordination between the office of the VC and that of the other university functionaries. The university needs both devolution of power and delegation of authority, as well as greater coordination for its smooth functioning. But the question is: how could a VC function smoothly or develop his vision in coordination with others if he remains surrounded most of the time only by some known faces? The VC quite candidly apologized on 24th May for not being able to convene the meeting of the Academic Council at regular intervals, which he promised earlier (the last one he called after a lapse of six months). There is obviously a gap between what he desires and what he can do. How could he function the way he desires if he permits himself, seemingly, to act as a "captive" in the hands of few whose ends are different from his own? The lessons of the past decade and a half must not be lost if the VC wants to leave a new legacy for his successors.

There is, indeed, a greater stake involved. The publicly-funded universities have become somewhat wasteful luxuries for a poverty-stricken country such as ours. After all, the poor taxpayers who in the long run pay for their sustenance are least benefited by them. The University of Dhaka

migration raises the urban unemployment rate, and other undesirable activity levels. The consequences of these on the socio-political fabric are considerable. This raises the question of alternative strategy of spatial allocation of industries. Since there is a space limitation in the cities like Dhaka, the alternative strategy of development is to create rural peri-urban centres in Thana and District towns with financial incentives for the potential industries to move to those towns and create job opportunities. But such development requires infrastructural facilities like roads and communications to be developed first which needs public investment. This is a matter of general national development strategy.

## Some Concluding Remarks

The resolution of the Dhaka city environment problem, which is a multi-dimensional issue, requires not only efficient management of the city's sewerage, garbage disposal, clean water supply, drainage system, control of traffic and two-stroke engines on the roads, slum clearance etc., but also the long-run planning of city development, extension and urban regeneration activities as well as the adoption of appropriate national development strategy encouraging dispersal of industries towards the peri-urban cities in the district and Thana towns. The latter calls for substantial public investments on roads and communications systems of the country as well as financial incentives for dispersal of private investments to those new urban centres.

tops this list of the publicly-owned universities. Two other general universities in the country, Chittagong and Rajshahi, are already in the tight grip of the zealous, to the dismay of many of those who are concerned about the future of liberal arts and higher scientific education in the country. And if, allegedly, the Middle Age-type dark clique based in Katabon are allowed to succeed in their dubious, backward and topsy-turvy schemes, then Dhaka University will soon have the same fate and predicament as that of Chittagong and Rajshahi. Certainly, the VC would not wish to reign over a campus whose functioning is marked by unremitted stalemate and violence as the ones in the other two cities of the country.

To counteract the evil designs of the brunet forces as well as to establish the credibility of his administration the DU VC may begin by taking firm action against those "teachers" who indulged in fraudulent exercise and deceitful conduct during the DU Senate election. If he continues to give them license, these very forces would gull all the good things he wants to promote in the university. Secondly, the VC may ask the university institutes, departments and faculties to offer feedback to his vision, as contained in the paper he already circulated, and a special meeting of the Academic Council be convened to bring ideas together. A collective vision may then appropriately be developed, which would ensure commitment from all sides, make it workable, and at the same time affirm the VC in his leadership position.

The DU VC would indeed find most of his colleagues to his side if he truly means to develop a vision of higher education and excellence in the university and to develop it in accordance with the needs of the coming millennium. To this end, the VC would have to change his current style of leadership: he must bridge the yawning gap between what he professes and practiced, act independent of party politics of either type, distance himself from the self-appointed feudal zealots and mobilize his network of university mechanisms at all levels, harmonizing all to the ultimate well-being of the university community and serve the greater interest of the country at large.

The author is a Professor of International Relations, University of Dhaka.

We accept the 'bigness' of our big neighbour, but at the same time we also expect that our smallness will not be taken advantage of. Taking the welfare of the subcontinent into consideration, it must be said that if South Asian nations are to move forward successfully with a programme of cooperative development, India must ward off its geopolitical model of the 'sphere of influence' and deal fairly with her small neighbours as sovereign equals. Until such change in India's political philosophy, policy and strategy is effected, smaller South Asian nations would do well to give serious thought to the idea of a 'SAARC minus India' as proposed by Mr Kabir in these columns (DS Feb. 24). I suggest such a grouping may be named as Association of South Asian Rim Countries (ASARC).

M A Hannan  
9 Baitul Aman  
Shyamoli,  
Dhaka-1207.