

Ties With Tokyo

The high point of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Japan is discernible in the response she has been able to secure from the host government to Bangladesh's development needs as visualised against the backdrop of recent changes in the regional outlook. Not only has the Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto recognised the importance of Mongla port and Rupsha Bridge for the sake of giving Bangladesh an infrastructural depth but also for lending us a hand in giving land-locked Nepal an easy access through Bangladesh. India has already allowed passage of Nepalese goods through her territory, so that what remains to be done is an effectualisation of it by an extension through a Bangladesh port to the maritime world. Similarly, the Ganges Barrage Project has not merely become feasible as a result of the long-duration water accord with India but also for the fact that it is urgently needed to be constructed as part of a national water management strategy. Japan has indicated her willingness to fund the building of Rupsha Bridge and development of Mongla port. On the Ganges Barrage project, she has promised to finance technical studies at this stage keeping her windows open for concerted funding with big donors when the time comes for it. It is significant that Japanese PM referred to our premier's overture with the G-7 countries for raising the level of assistance to the LDCs. Japan's hands on the question were strengthened as the only Asian member of the G-7, added Mr. Hashimoto.

Tokyo-Dhaka ties are on a rejuvenation course following the warm-up phase one has already witnessed in the resumption of Japanese ODA to Bangladesh after a two-year freeze on it. The special thrusts being given for new and expanded co-operation are clearly identifiable in the accord signed on the protection and promotion of investment and the three agreements made for soft loans amounting to 15.25 billion yen or Tk 525 crore. The agreement concluded on the new international airport in Chittagong is also a welcome piece of news.

Japan has been a tower of strength for our infrastructure development projects, but it is time her attention turned to the special EPZ and relocation of her textile units so as to help us build appropriate backward linkages to the RMG sector.

With Japan we have had a series of understandings reached at the state level and between our private sectors. Have we been following these up vigorously?

Dutiful but Unrewarded

A seventeen-member security staff of a closed factory in Tongi has reportedly decided to go for collective suicide to protest alleged maltreatment they are being subjected to. For 11 months the factory has remained closed and all the workers have left but the services of securitymen have neither been terminated nor are they being given their salaries. Repeated appeals for either payment or termination with benefits have fallen on deaf ears. A desperate appeal to the deputy commissioner of Gazipur for redress reportedly elicited a response advising them to file cases with an appropriate court.

Now the irony is that the security personnel cannot seek help from a court because of lack of means. With water, gas and power lines disconnected, the men are in a most helpless situation. Forced to starve, they cannot even submit the guns and bullets to the authority. Apparently, the management of the factory has no concern about the fate of these people who have served and are still serving there. That the 17 men are dutiful is clear. They want to return the arms back to the authority so that they can come out with their career records clean. Even after being forced to live in sub-human conditions they are apparently proving to be conscientious.

Unless the threat of mass suicide is a publicity stunt and if they carry out the threat, who will be responsible for the tragedy? Factories may be closed but there are certainly rules to be followed. We urge the labour and industry ministries to look into the matter urgently. The management of the factory must be made to go by the rules so that the securitymen receive justice.

Peace Prospect in CHT

Anticipating that a peace agreement between the Parbatya Chattagram Janasanghati Samity (PCJSS) and the government is round the corner, activists of a faction of the Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) have reportedly started enlisting themselves with the Shantibahini. This is to avail themselves of the opportunity being offered by the government in the form of rehabilitating all Shantibahinimen following a peace accord. The PCP faction that supports PCJSS president Shantu Larma is seizing the opportunity. Let there be not even a feeble voice of dissent in the Shantibahini ranks about the peace deal.

A peace accord such as the proposed one rests on fair play and sincerity on the part of both sides. Now PCP activists are crossing the border to prove their bona fides as Shantibahini cadres. Can experience be of any help to screen any fake Shantibahini claimants from the genuine members. After all, the PCJSS may one day face its own problem with intruders if any. That should be impressed upon the leaders of the PCJSS.

Shantibahinimen stopped quite sometime ago from availing of the amnesty offered by the government largely because they smell a peace deal in the air. That is understandable: they are just expectantly waiting to get the benefit in a body and at a time. We want the tribal people to be fully unified in their greetings to the olive branch that is about to spread across the hills.

Turning Points in Hong Kong's History

Whether Hong Kong would be converted to the Chinese ways or China would be 'subverted' to the ways of Hong Kong is a question that only perhaps the fashionable observers ask; for, deeper down their psyches are the imprints of interaction and co-existence they have had historically between them.

Special Administrative Region in its history. The British turned their eyes to Hong Kong around 1839 with a view to smuggling opium from India into China where it was banned to yield them good money. The first Opium War between China and Britain followed with the latter winning it after having bombarded Chinese ports that refused to accept shipments of opium. Britain gained control of Hong Kong under the Treaty of Nanking and the Union Jack was raised on June 26, 1841.

The Second Opium War and further conflicts took place between 1850-1860 at the end of which the Kowloon peninsula and the stonecutters island were ceded to Britain in 1860. China under the Qing dynasty leased the new territories to Britain for 99 years.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin in his speech at the handover ceremony on June 30, 1997, referred to 'unequal treaties' China had signed with Britain under the Qing dynasty. The official position of China has, therefore, been that sovereignty over Hong Kong was never lost to Britain. It was only held under suspension by

unequal treaties.

The British hand seemed stained by the historical fact of their having taken control of Hong Kong. Kowloon peninsula and Stonecutters Island via the poppy trade motive and any casual reader of Chinese history would vouchsafe how dazed the opium-addicted Chinese people remained for nearly a century.



Time and Tide
Shah Husain Imam

The British lost Hong Kong to Japan between 1941 and 1945. The British Army surrendered Hong Kong to Japan in the early stages of the Second Great War. This made Winston Churchill extremely unhappy until the British regained control of Hong Kong following the Japanese surrender in 1945. Earlier, the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 had seen the Japanese advance into China rapidly with the result that there fol-

lowed a big exodus of Chinese refugees into Hong Kong.

Thus rapport between Hong Kong Chinese and the mainland Chinese grew under conditions of trials and tribulations first during the Sino-Japanese War and then when the Japanese ruled Hong Kong from 1941 to 1945.

In 1982 talks on the future of

the 99-year lease period. Consequently, the Basic Law came to be formulated for the administration of Hong Kong on the mutually agreed 'one country, two systems' basis with defence and foreign affairs vesting in the central authorities and a high degree of autonomy granted to the regional administration in all other matters. But the legislature has been reconstituted with a fifty per cent presence of Chinese government nominees in it and its character would only be established after the new elections, due in May next year, are held.

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The British sovereignty over Hong Kong came under onslaught from the mainland in 1966-67 when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China spread to Hong Kong after the nearby Portuguese

Colony of Macau had capitulated before the extremist pressure of the cultural zealots. Macau formally returns to China in December, 1999.

British Control of Hong Kong was also endangered by the ripple effects of Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Britain succeeded in bringing back order on both occasions largely because of the implicit backing of the local residents who did not have the mental conditioning of the mainland Chinese to be able to appreciate their high-voltage political adventurism. In fact, there were Chinese on those two occasions who came to Hong Kong fleeing troubles in the mainland.

Perhaps a gem of an attribution is made to former Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai who reminded Hong Kong that China benefited from Hong Kong's prosperity.

Hong Kong's economy is one-fifth the size of Chinese economy and she has the fifth largest foreign exchange reserve in the world (60 billion dollars). Yet the country did not raise any clamour for self-determination, a political demand one has gotten so familiar with in a turbulent world of today. That is a measure of the Hong Kong people's single-minded devotion to their economy.

Conversing with Gujral

The breakthrough at Islamabad does not surprise Gujral. "I am an optimist and I believe that relations with Pakistan will vastly improve." The prime minister has no doubt that the two countries are moving towards an era of conciliation

tion government he heads. He has the gift of analysis and clear, forceful statement. Above all, he uses his gifts for the common people and not for political or economic.

Otherwise, the residence is the same. You go over the same exercise of security. A noiseless car takes you to the porch of the house and a white-clad peon conducts you to the waiting room, which has changed in decor over the years. However, the drawing room has a new look. Large paintings by Husain and a Satish Gujral, the prime minister's younger brother, cover the walls. A few pots of saplings against a well-curtained window cut direct sun. Some thinking has gone behind it and this reflects sensitivity to beauty and the arts. Indira Gandhi, too, had an aesthetic touch but she never lived in the house.

"I do not want many files to come to me," says Gujral. "In fact, I have already distributed work in such a way that very few papers come to me. I want to concentrate on reviving the ethos of the country and that of the national movement. Gujral, his father and his mother — all went to jail many a time during the British rule."

Turning to present situation, I ask: Why did he not remove Laloo Prasad Yadav from the Bihar chief ministership straightaway? In reply, he says: "In India, people confuse authority with authoritarianism. Had I acted then, I would have been considered an authoritarian."

Ian. I want to do things properly even at the risk of being called indecisive. I am a patient man. It took me two days to persuade Chandrasekhar Prasad Verma to resign from the council of ministers. I did not want to use my position to dismiss him."

His forte is foreign affairs.

BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

He is proud to have reconstructed the policy after Nehru. He feels satisfied over what he has done, although he is reluctant to use the phrase, 'Gujral doctrine', to describe his efforts. He says the water treaty with Bangladesh is already paying dividends in the north-east. "When I was there three weeks ago, I could see the results." The right of passage given to Nepal, Gujral is confident, will push up its trade with Bangladesh and beyond and will also benefit the north-eastern states as well. (Once he agreed to the passage, both Nepalese prime minister and foreign minister said that they themselves have been instigating anti-India feeling. But now they were convinced of India's friendly bonafides after Gujral's visit).

Talks are taking place with the underground Nagas and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), Gujral says. He does not want to elaborate it since the negotiations are at a

critical stage. But he is sure that there will be 'a ceasefire' both in Nagaland and Assam before August 15. This will be, indeed, an achievement because the area has not experienced peace for decades.

The breakthrough at Islamabad does not surprise Gujral. I

the phase of rancour, enmity and confrontation.

He specifically mentions the purchase of power, 3,000 Kws, from Pakistan. Once that comes through, Ludhiana and other parts of Punjab will prosper. And the purchase of power will follow trade. Pakistan will also gain. It is a question of time.

The prime minister says that he has departed from the old practice of sending politicians abroad for establishing contacts with foreign governments. Cabinet secretary Subramaniam is back after visiting Washington. He appears to have had a satisfactory round of talks with the State Department. In fact, he was briefing the prime minister when I was sitting in his waiting room.

"I got delayed because of what the cabinet secretary had to tell me about his visit to the US," says Gujral. "It has been a useful visit. Our relations with

America have improved substantially."

It was Sunday when I met him. But there is no such thing as Saturday or Sunday for him. "The ministries I have handled before becoming prime minister were like a kindergarten," says Gujral. "Even after putting in 16 hours I find I cannot finish the day's work." Travelling makes it still worse. "I reject 50 per cent of requests. Even then, I have to travel most of the time."

"This helps me to stay in contact with the country," says Gujral. "One feels depressed in Delhi because the people here are all the time concentrating on Laloo or the price of petroleum products. I use my visits to the states to put before the chief ministers the concept I want the nation to follow. I can write it on paper but I am able to put across it better through talks."

The concept or dream, whatever it is, the prime minister is full of it. Indians will string along with him, provided he gives them tack their hope — and faith — in the country.

OPINION

Women MPs

A Qayyum

contributions of their own, thereby perpetuating the age-old male domination in all spheres of the society.

Three, the women MPs so indirectly elected cannot be said to be the true representatives of their reserved constituencies as they have not been elected on their own merit, such as education, ability, social and political contributions, etc.

Our womenfolk comprise 50 per cent of our total population. It would, therefore, be only right and fair that at least one third, if not more, of the seats in the Parliament be reserved for them and, like their male counterparts, they too are directly elected by the voters of their reserved constituencies. A provision on these lines can alone ensure the rights and obligations of our womenfolk; rescue them from the clutches of a male-dominated society; enable them to catch up with their male counterparts in education and other social and national-building activities; reverse various social evils such as repression on women for dowries, multiple marriage, etc., and above all, in making their contributions which they can do much more effectively towards halting the population boom which, as both nationally

and internationally recognised, is our Number One problem.

Both our present Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition who was also our former Prime Minister are women. They may have many serious differences of opinion on various issues. On this particular issue, however, they should have no difference of opinion whatsoever. On the contrary, they should hold exactly identical views without any reservation. But the big question is: will these two leading women of our country ever join hands and willingly take immediate steps to amend the existing provisions which gravely militate against their own gender?

If they do, it would undoubtedly be welcomed by the entire nation and, in particular, by 60 millions of their own gender. On the other hand, if they don't and which, unfortunately, is more likely, it will only go to show that none of these two leaders of our country has any sincere desire to do anything, however desirable the same may be, which might even distantly go against their own personal self-interest because the continued retention of the existing provisions will imply that both of them have only one and one aim in view, i.e., to go on hoping to be able to secure an undeserving edge over her nearest rival in order to gain a flawed majority in the Parliament and thereby to grab power by any means.

Don't Ask Me about the Budget

Chuckles

Like most people around me, I don't understand the budget technically, but, like everyone, I can pass a few remarks about it: in the same way ordinary souls talk about any topical issue in the drawing rooms. The latter were busy with the thundering voices of the MPs debating the budget in the JS. The tremendous heat generated perhaps set fire to the gas well in Sylhet. The opposition has demanded an inquiry into this strange coincidence.

It looks as if this budget is chasing the elusive bucks, and the liabilities are chasing the Finance Minister, in the eternal game of balancing the budget. I can only guess that the harassed gentleman might have made a list from A to Z, and called in some kids to pick out the lottery slips; and, there you have it, all the proposed revenue collections from amazing sources, to meet some of the wasteful expenditures before the millennium can say good night.

The local investors are busy counting the default claims, and are keeping mum while the banks are beating the empty drums, to scare away the foreign investors. The Dhaka Stock Exchange acted like a cyclone (typical in this geographical zone), accompanied by huge

tidal bores, which swept away everything including reputations. I do not understand liquidity, but at least it is not something solid.

The foreign aid donors have changed the tune from macro to micro credits, patting Bangladesh in the back for the green revolution of the second kind, meaning the mini green buck technique. Good for the promotion of sonar Bangla and the escape from the bottomless basket image.

My wife asked me to tell her the salient part of the budget in the familiar matrimonial language. Well, I told her, almost everything has been taxed now, including her long telephonic chatting; and she should not be surprised if her 3-wheel baby-taxi suddenly started running on two wheels, as the third wheel would be under clearance at the Customs, at enhanced rate; which, I assured her, was quite different from the empowerment of women (naturally, I do not know what it means).

The next saree she bought might be more porous, with less thread counts, and less cotton, unless she was willing to pay more for the national develop-

ment of her dear *matri bhumi* (the explanation was too technical for her). She won't be paid for her development efforts, but the civil service would be given *bakshish* of Taka, 2,000 crore to tackle the systems loss. I also told her (in parenthesis), that according to Parkinson's Laws, the bureaucracy always expanded, never decreased. She has seen black elephants, but not the white ones roaring the corridors of power.

She was pleased to note that now the landlords would be duly recognised by the government, in anticipation of the annual *salami*. I complimented her on her patience to wait for the car; only she now needed more practice of this austere virtue. She was surprised that cigarette was not taxed, and the FM forgot about the development of the milk industry (I informed her we still cannot make powder milk).

Service!

Sir, Nowadays the importance of the telephone service needs no explanation. It is the prime media of communication. We, who are the lucky holder of a telephone set, completely depend on it more than on the mail. But recently, it is painful for me to say that the telephone line between Sylhet and Sunamgonj is disturbing regularly. As I am a student of Shahjalal University, I have to stay in Sylhet. Besides my mother's physical condition is deteriorating rapidly. So I have to maintain contact with my parents at least once in a week.

I earnestly appeal to the authority concerned to take necessary steps to make the line normal.

M Kausar
Shahjalal University, Sylhet

One-year honeymoon

Sir, After reading so many reviews of one year of the regime in power (old/new tonic in old/new bottle), I got the virus, and feel like jotting down my instant reactions, in a lighter vein, as a non-professional observer.

The honeymoon period is of course an over-sensitive one of giddy experiences, when omissions and commissions are usually exempted. It is fondly hoped that now the period of arrogance and haughtiness by the leaders on comports with power would be found congenial — by the citizens.

The rough edges should now be rounding off, and interfacing with the opposition would display more analogue ambience than digital asperity. The holier-than-thou attitude has to come down to the level of the *matri bhumi*, and the curfews of arrogance and haughtiness need the application of cosmetics prepared from an age-old medicine known as humility.

Too much hatred and viciousness can be seen and heard, resounding doubly from

To the Editor...

The hartal craze

Sir, It was thought that with the establishment of democracy through June 12, 1996 election (which by and large was nationally acclaimed to be free and fair), the hartal calls which earlier had attained the height of almost a craze would be over. But after over a spell of less than a year, with the call of BNP chairperson to observe a countrywide hartal on 23.3.97 (since reported in almost all dailies), it seems that the beginning of the hartal craze has been initiated with the forgoing conclusion of unending miseries for the people as was experienced in the past. In a democratic set-up, such a frenzy may be the privilege of political stalwarts. But the language in which the hartal call has been made reminds me of two stories — one read locally and the other heard long before. To understand the story the language since reported in a local daily on 20.3.97 is reproduced below:

"She called upon all nationalist and patriotic people to participate in the programmes (agitation leading to hartal on 23.3.97) beginning today if they really loved the country. By observing these programmes, we'll let people understand who want to protect the country and who don't," Begum Zia said.

The stories would appear that perhaps those were told in advance to fit into the exact situation that has been obtaining now. It went like this —

"Politician's wife to her husband — Dear, when persons are patriots? Politician husband — At our call when they resort to hartal, violence, arson, looting and the like, then they are considered as patriots?"

Wife — And when they are terrorists? Husband — At other's call when they resort to even mild protests, sit-ins, demonstrations etc., then they are called terrorists."

The other one was about late Gen Ziaul Haque of Pakistan. He was a military dictator. But he wanted to give democratic colour to his regime. But he was afraid to lose election. So, cunningly he decided on a 'yes-no' type of referendum. He said one who would say 'yes' to his presidency, would mean he was voting for the cause of Islam! And those saying 'no' would be considered as ones who won't support the cause of Islam! It