

## Brutal Student Politics

The fiercest clash between female students of rival organisations anywhere in the country so far took place at Eden Girls' University College on Tuesday last. Our imagination fails us to comprehend under what circumstances even girl students can turn so violent, cruel and militant. For the first time they seem to have matched their male counterparts in the universities and colleges. We are horrified. We admit we have not enough language to express our outrage. Now here exactly is a proof of our political decline. Why should student organisations — least of all the female of them — take fight to each other in such a bloody and violent manner? No reason to think they do so for ideology's sake. Far from that, the clashes are more often than not an outburst of the unhealthy rivalry between their parent organisations — the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The hard truth is that students are unwisely used by political parties to get engaged in such dirty jobs. There is no alternative to bringing an end to this if we want to secure the country's future.

The question is how to accomplish the task. President Sahabuddin Ahmed has already indicated a way out. We fully support his view that a moratorium on student politics be put in place. The 1973 University Ordinance itself has a solution for the problem. According to that, the student fronts of different political parties enjoy no right to engage in the type of partisan politics they do now. In fact, the central students' union is given recognition to take up general students demands and to fight for their causes. Subsequently when banned political parties were revived after 1975, the student organisations also got a legal sanction for such political activity. So the problem can be solved also through delinking the student fronts from their parent organisations.

Now can we urge both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition to make a serious attempt to play their part of the role in this matter? Criminalisation of or deterioration of quality in politics have gone too far to have the political focus right. The baneful influences of politics on students have broken the backbone of education. Now the brutalisation, as illustrated by the latest clash at Eden College, of society through violence at educational institutions is proving too much. It may be taken to everyone's door. This is not an warning but a natural process. So let the main political leaders be alive to the alarm bell and bring their houses in order.

## Learning to Use Roads

We know there is a specific authority seized day and night of the problems of movement in the city. That unflagging care by police or road transport authority has unfortunately not been proving up to the challenge. Hence Tuesday's meeting of a co-ordination committee under Mayor Hanif's chairmanship. The deliberations and decisions of the meeting speak of a positive approach to Dhaka's traffic problems and are most welcome as such. Yes, we need a goodly number of link roads modelled on the Panthapath. Not before we get these roads, can we make the artery roads rickshaw free. In planning for a jam-free Dhaka, it may not be forgotten that the rickshaw passenger must not be put to more vexing problems than they are facing now. Link roads are a way out of the conflicting demands.

More one-way roads is another way to effectively fight the jam. But why should a road in key crowded areas be unidirectional all the time? In fact, many roads can be made one-way during only the peak hours of eight to eleven and three to six.

Metered taxi-rides should not cost a pie more than what the so-called baby-taxis charge now. It is these that must go and not the rickshaws. With baby-taxis out the jam will considerably then out on the main roads. But taxicabs may not take the whole load left by the babies. There can not be any substitute for having a modern bus service in the city. The buses that now serve the city are a shame. And once you get the middle class to ride buses, road congestion due to overcrowding by vehicles will cease to be a problem.

More roads and more and ride-able buses would not, cannot solve the problem wholly. The key lies with the road-users, mainly the drivers of vehicles and then the pedestrians. There are no bus, scooter or rickshaw stands in the city — in the real sense of the term. No driver in Dhaka ever cares to slow down and creep to the side in order to stop. All of Dhaka's traffic police seem to be ignorant of this primary requirement of the driver. Whatever the improvement in the physical parameters of road traffic, road-users must learn how to use the roads and keep fast to their knowledge, for their own benefit, solely.

## A Little More Pace, Please

The UNICEF annual report on the state of states has so far been one very dependably strong argument against those that ceaselessly moan over some imagined going to the dogs by everything Bangladeshi. This year also it has many warm and encouraging things to say about how we have been doing over the year. Overall, it is not bad at all. But the pace is not one that can promise us a fitting entry into the third millennium. The report gives meat to Dr Mahbub-ul Huq's enthusiastic high hopes about this country but certain aspects of life and society here tend to smother the gains in other areas.

This sad lack on the nutrition front is vitiating the prospect of Bangladesh becoming a habitat to a quality people — which it must be in order merely to survive. Of the three million new faces we welcome to our society every year, one and a half are born with weight far less than normal. Most of them may not make that up in life. So? Shall we not be weighed down by that half in everything?

Sanitation is another area where we are lacking shamefully and dangerously. With only 48 per cent having access to sanitary latrines, the gains made in the potable water front are all lost to diarrhoea. Child mortality could go down dramatically if a near hundred per cent went for any kind of a pit. That would have resulted in people's going for less children and putting more value on the one or two they have. Life as a whole could be wholesome with a spurt in the sanitation situation.

Things are moving, to be sure. A little more pace, please.

# The South Asian Growth Quadrangle : What for?

by Munim Kumar Barai

*The potentials of SAGQ are many and the success of the venture can even determine the strategic importance of Bangladesh in the long term. A location between the two giants of Asia, as a gateway to SAGQ as well as to SAARC, Bangladesh has the promise to become important.*

THE 9th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Male is now over and no formal protest by Pakistan did come as was thought to be. The Sri Lankan government aired some discontent. It was not done at the summit venue but in Colombo by a middle grade official. On the other hand, our Prime Minister in her speech hinted on the region's enough resources and their prudent and optimal utilisation through regional mechanism, including growth quadrangle, which provides for collaboration for specific projects. This, in her view, can usher in a new era of sustained economic growth, peace and prosperity for the people of this region. This reference also did not bring any comment from any side. So as a separate regional body, SAGQ should not be seen as undermining the spirit of SAARC. It could rather work as a synergy or an extension to the on going effort to create free trade area in South Asia. Here I would like to concentrate only on the issue of SAGQ because the issue of SAFTA or SAFTA has already taken a lot of print media space since December 1993 when Sri Lanka formally launched the initiative to create SAARC Preferential Trade Area (SAPTA) by the seven SAARC countries.

### Areas under SAGQ

The SAGQ is a significant initiative in the sense that the four members of the organisation have for the first time identified some important areas for cooperation at the sub-regional level. The identified sectors are — multimodal transportation and communication, energy, trade and investment promotion, tourism and optimal and sustainable utilisation of natural resource endowments. These are basically the core economic areas of any economy and the development of these areas has the most important effect on the overall economic growth of a country or region.

The point which needs to be emphasised is that through co-operation in the specified areas, each member of SAGQ has the potentials to prosper. Because the members together consti-

tute varied natural resource base like water, coal, natural gas, mountain range as well as fertile soil producing rice, wheat, tea, tobacco, sugar and so on. In terms of water per unit of land the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin is second only to the Amazon.

### Bangladesh and SAGQ

Every peace loving and patriotic citizen of Bangladesh wants to see Bangladesh economically prosper and become strategically important. If we think that we can do it by ourselves by formulating a strategy to employ our all means oriented to the west or east then we will probably fail on both accounts. Our devotion to and exploration of the west has so far put us where we are economically and otherwise. And strategic importance of a country is determined by the geographical location it is in and more importantly, the economic and political developments within and its surroundings. In the context of a changed international economic and political scenario, every reasonable and rational citizen can perceive our own position in these regards. With a bitter economic relation with India and an underdeveloped market inside, we can expect to better our economic position only if we can get enough financial and technical support from the outside countries as well as a very strong trade relation with a third country from where we can cheaply import our daily necessities we are at present importing from India.

The external support has to come in the form of direct investment and/or aid and grant. Those who are keeping a close eye on the developments in financial front, must be aware of the fact that competition for invisible funds is too keen and the competitors are too many. Our expectation to draw investors from the Southeast Asian countries can face the single largest challenge from Vietnam. What we have to offer

to the investors of that region, Vietnam has everything of that. Moreover, it has some extra advantages over us. It is physically close to the countries of Southeast Asia, it has a more disciplined workforce. Nearness to China has offered it strategic importance to all major powers of the world. Above all, it is now a member of the Association of the South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Inclusion of the Republic of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar in the fold of ASEAN will automatically put them ahead of us in the race of drawing FDI from Southeast Asian origin. On the other hand, the Europeans have their own targets of investment and in their priority agenda the East European countries and the countries of Latin America come before us.

On the other hand, the concept of providing aid and grants to the poorer countries is undergoing a change due to the massive changes taking place in the international eco-political environment. Feeding the developing countries for physical and political support has lost its appeal and utility with the end of the Cold War. Moreover, a subtle effort to replace aid and grants by FDI is taking place. So in drying up situation of aid-pipeline we have to generate and/or entice extra foreign resources (in the form of FDI) for our development and other economic activities. Bangladesh, with all its positive attributes, alone stands on a shaky dias in the newer context. A bigger market with a better transportation and communication system, availability of natural resources and raw materials will play a definite role in offering weight to this region as a whole.

SAGQ has the utility here. The areas identified for cooperation are mostly related to infrastructure. Someone has rightly pointed out that SAGQ is a mega infrastructural project comprising many areas. Let us

discuss few of the expected benefits that Bangladesh can derive over the years from SAGQ. Multilateral transportation which has generated much of the debate is the first and real tangible project that will connect Bangladesh with India, Bhutan and Nepal on the one side and Myanmar, Thailand and Laos on the other. Every country connected by roads will have the right to use others territory for by-passing or sending goods and commodities to or through the land. The very opportunity of land access can help open and foster many economic opportunities which have so far remained unexplored. A survey initiated by the ESCAP estimated that if Bangladesh is allowed unhindered cargo movement by India through its territories to Nepal, the country's exports to that country could increase by \$50 to \$100 million a year. Incorporation of Bhutan in the list will make the figure still higher. My personal experience emboldens me to write that textile and apparel products of Bangladesh have high demand in Bhutan as well as in Nepal. This would also be true for the states of India inside SAGQ. Processed foods, toiletries and few other light industrial products can have their markets in the region under SAGQ. So the trade impact of transportation (by road and rail) and communication cannot be overlooked.

Energy is a sector where increase of demand is an open-ended affair. Due to the increase of population its demand goes higher and due to increase of economic activities its demand goes further up. In recent years we are following an industrial policy (Industrial Policy of 1991) which dreams of the rapid industrialisation of Bangladesh. We have a population of about 120 million strength and this figure is growing by 2.1 per cent per year. So our demand for power for consumption and industrialisation will continue to rise. Present

demand for electricity is 2600 MW which is estimated to be increasing at the rate of 11 per cent per year. And the country is producing about 1900 MW with many old and obsolete power plants which have become prone to accident. However, even by conservative estimates the requirement of firm generation capacity will be in the order of 4000 MW by the year 2000. Our present rate of generation of electricity and the expected growth makes it a difficult task to achieve the target by the same period. The GEM region with the rivers and the water resources, if properly harnessed, can yield an enormous amount of electricity. If this opportunity can offer us a viable (repeat 'viable') option for as well as pollution-free source of electricity, then there should not be much brou-rais- ing in the matter. Even India has recently decided to import power from its arch rival Pakistan which is not seen as a sur- render by the Indians. We should not forget the possibility of the benefit of irrigation which could come up as side-shots of power harnessing and can give us the chance of making the whole northern part of Bangladesh a rich food production belt.

Tourism is another sector where this region as a whole can become a centre of attraction. SAGQ with the world's highest mountain range, the longest beach, the natural Sunderbans with the Royal Bengal Tigers, the tea gardens of Sylhet, Assam, and Darjeeling, the valleys, the rivers can offer an exciting package to the tourists.

So the potentials of SAGQ are many and the success of the venture can even determine the strategic importance of Bangladesh in the long term. A location between the two giants of Asia, as a gateway to SAGQ as well as to SAARC, Bangladesh has the promise to become important. Well developed transportation and communication

networks that make a land bridge between South Asia and South East Asia will enhance Bangladesh's importance and foreign exchange earnings. Access to a wider market will promote the export of our commodities. There is an estimate that US \$1 billion increase in exports generates 19,600 employment in the United States. In the context of Bangladesh, employment impact of export would be much higher as the readymade garment (RMG) industry is showing. The RMG in 1995-96 has earned an amount of \$2000 million from exports and the industry employ about 1.5 million of our workforce. If we consider that 0.5 million of the workers in the industry produce garments for the domestic market, then the rest 1 million workers are employed for export of \$2000 million. So an increase of \$100 million in export of RMG can employ about 50,000 more people. Our RMG has a potential to grow a medium to large market in the SAGQ region. SAGQ can also increase our employment in production, infrastructure and service sector industries.

### Conclusions

I don't see the new organisation as a recipe for achieving an all round economic progress, nor I dare see it so in the near future. But the fact is that in the absence of a continuous reluctant partner which may block all the economic initiatives that could be brought to the organisation, there is a fair chance that SAGQ can make real progress in the identified fields in a shorter period of time. Eminent economist of Pakistan Dr Mahbub ul-Haq expressed his strong reservation against the role of Pakistan inside SAARC when he visited Bangladesh last and gave an interview to a section of the press. He opened his mind up to the extent that Pakistan should change its stand vis-à-vis SAARC or SAPTA. Rather hopefully SAGQ will not have a partner like Pakistan inside it. As a prioritised, practical, action-oriented, timebound and incremental approach in selection, development and implementation of projects, the SAGQ has a far better off position to succeed.

## Socio-political Scenario in Recent Times

by Kazi Alauddin Ahmed

*In recent days there has been hideous mud-slinging and personal slandering on the floor of the Jatiya Sangsad which often flings on insensitivity from both sides. The opposition benchers quite often initiated provocation and the government benchers were all up in retaliation.*

approach of the Awami League Government was indeed praiseworthy. Sheikh Hasina's decision to refrain her ministers and state ministers from joining the election campaign in favour of the party candidate was again a great contributory factor at ensuring an absolutely fair and free election. This bold and honest stance eventually deprived the opponents of the opportunity to claim interference.

If, however, BNP had lost, things would have been different. And even if there would not have been any rigging BNP would not have accepted the results. At least, the statement of BNP candidate Advocate Abdul Wahab Zia, long before the results were announced, could corroborate the suggestion. It turned up eventually a pleasant surprise that the entire show was conducted by the Election Commission in a super commendable manner.

The Chief Election Commissioner Abu Hena has done an excellent job. He has been able to prove again that he is capable of ensuring an absolutely free and fair election. The insidious attempt at slandering him was indeed preposterous. The row over his neutrality following the June 12, 1996 general election was very unfortunate and now it has been proved that the call for his removal was born of utter frustration in losing power. Apart from the satisfactory role played by the Election Commission as a whole and the splendid support of the different law enforcing agencies besides the district administration of Manikganj by-

election. Even if she does not care to have it there shall not be any thing to be surprised. We must not forget that she has a number of items on the agenda of 'remove the government' issue. The main item being the 'sovereignty sell out' by Hasina, the staggering supplementaries have been Ganges water treaty, transit, Asian Highway, power-buying from India, flooding of Indian goods in Bangladesh markets, sub-regional forum (she had been in the past one of D-8 forum where Pakistan is one) etc. Parallel to Manikganj by-election she was invited but did not accept. The trend that has been set by Prime Minister Hasina can only be retained if the Leader of the Opposition shows similar boldness. It is not to doubt her capabilities but by her own set trend so far it will be difficult to be optimistic.

Sheikh Hasina's performance in the June 23, 1997 face the people's programme on BTV was on the whole mature and embracing. While she was firm in her convictions over the successes she has achieved over the past one year of her governance, she had no pretensions over her failures either.

She had plainly admitted that as a human being she could have made some mistakes and simultaneously sought the panel members and the people at large to point out her mistakes so that she could make due amends. Although, to some questioners her replies were in a round about way (evasive, may be), on the whole it was a good show.

Amongst the many complaints, rather accusations against AL government, the lat-

est being the budget for 1997-98. The BNP has viewed the budget as being complimentary to Indian budget for the year. The 'wizards' or shall we say 'witch hunters' have in fact, given biggest compliments to SAMS Kibria by such negative comments. Even if we agree that the sur-charges would be burdensome for the intended sectors, there would not be any major repercussion on the prices of essential commodities. At least the market indices indicate such a positive phenomenon. A hartial on this account on July 3, 1997 however suited their logic. Begum Zia shall 'face the people' on TV when she may be asked strident questions as to how she took to hartial which she vehemently condemned and detested during her time in power.

In recent days there has been hideous mud-slinging and personal slandering on the floor of the Jatiya Sangsad which often flings on insensitivity from both sides. The opposition benchers quite often initiated provocation and the government benchers were all up in retaliation. It is not known how long the nation should bear such a colossal wastage of public money.

Despite aspersions and counter-aspersions some of the BNP men made interesting notes for the government to

consider. For instance, Mr Mahbubur Rahman MP was very critical about the slow progress on the issue of autonomy of the broadcasting media. He thought that too much time was already spent and claimed that he had the 'expertise' to do the job in 90 days only! Any-way the report of the relevant committee is now ready and shall be submitted to the Prime Minister within a very short time.

We are currently passing through the 'rocket launcher' episode preceded by numerous public lynchings of alleged child lifters and, of course, the notorious 'Sweden Islam' story. Home Minister Rafiqul Islam, BU has been frantically trying to contain terrorist and other anti-social activities but unfortunately he continues to be legalised by some of his men in the police force, perhaps. Still then, he retains his credibility for being absolutely non-partisan when handling law and order situation. Some of the notable BNP leaders even have commended his sincere efforts but some more are still harping on the old, stale tune of harassing BNP men. They do not see that even so called Student League, Jubo League and Awami Leaguers are also not excepted. On these issues the accountability and transparency of the government have been, to an extent reasonably established. If some one does not want to agree he is free to exercise his prerogative of disagreeing. But that would make little difference to the truth.

The recent abrupt decision by the government for two-day weekly holiday on Fridays and Saturdays, although not demanded by any quarters, including the banking sector, has brought untold suffering to the common people, commercial firms and organisations transacting international business. If another government holiday, by chance, falls on Thursday or Sunday, the banks will have three holidays at a stretch. In case of two more holidays either affording Friday and sufficing Saturday banks will have four consecutive holidays — indeed a holiday bonanza.

It is imperative that our government should without further delay form a high level national commission consisting of eminent scientists, geologists, engineers and water experts to monitor the situation and to find out ways and means to combat and tackle these problems.

We would also request our members of the parliament of both Treasury and Opposition to kindly pay their due attention to these gigantic problems of river erosion and greenhouse effect and to work out plans and programmes to save our people from the approaching and nearing great disaster.

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### Bank holidays

Sir, Banks are essential financial institutions which foster the economic and commercial growth of a country and Bangladesh is no exception to the rule. In a sense, it has assumed the role of that of a utility service like water, electricity, gas, telephone etc. Its operation is badly needed every minute, hour and day with maximum working hours for public transaction, like opening of account, deposit/withdrawal of amount, purchase of pay orders/drafts, remittances of expatriates, local and international trade and commerce, payment of utility service bills and all other matters related to banking discipline. It is, in a real sense, the backbone of a country's economy.

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### To the Editor

#### Bus route from Mirpur to Sadarghat

Sir, Bus is the main transport media for poor and mediocre people. But it is sad that there is no direct bus or coaster service from Sadarghat to Mirpur. Mirpur is a fast-developing and densely-populated area in the Dhaka city. Hundreds of boys and girls and men and women move everyday to and from Mirpur and Sadarghat. Sadarghat is not only the life centre of old Dhaka city for having Judge's and Metropolitan Magistrate Courts, District Deputy Commissioner's office, 3 hospitals, different markets, river ports, etc., but it is also a centre of lauded educational institutions. Four reputed colleges and nine schools are situated in the compact vicinity of Sadarghat. The Jagannath University College, the country's largest educational institution after the Dhaka University is located here.

This college is bigger than University of Dhaka for its number of students of day and night sessions. Students, especially girls and women who attend from Mirpur, face immense trouble for want of direct bus service. Besides hundreds and thousands of men, women and old people of different walks of life move between Sadarghat and Mirpur everyday. Vaast majority of people of southern Bangladesh