The Baily Star

Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali Dhaka, Sunday, October 12, 1997

Let the Railways Live

The train collision at Singair in Jessore must not be taken as a tragedy in isolation. It is symptomatic of a general decline in Bangladesh of a pervasive and powerful maker and sustainer of modern civilisation — namely Railway. A gift of British colonialism through the good offices of Viceroy Lord Dalhousie it came to the subcontinent soon after networks started operating in George Stephenson's Britain. The railway widened immensely our material and cultural horizon. And it continues to be our best bet for prosperity and a desired level of social and economic management.

Successive governments, in both colonial East Pakistan and independent Bangladesh, had all a hand in the interminable process of strangulation of an infrastructure that took a century to build. That the present government is no different in its apathy for this vital pillar of our economy, a key to development and many things besides is borne by the facts of its failure to embrace a radically new approach and design a dynamic and comprehensive programme.

By comprehensive development we mean something dovetailed into the total picture of movement of people and goods of this nation. Each mode of transportation must be organised as complementary to another while retaining their competitiveness. In the last half a century, the years of independence specially, the transport sector, grew almost exponentially, to the complete exclusion of the railway system. Because everyone, the politicians and railway functionaries included, had personally to gain from decimating the big system and letting motor roads and vehicles flourish.

This criminal failure of responsibility is writ large on the thousands of shacks which encroach upon the tracks in the suburbs and the bazars that straddle yards and approaches to them. The telltale picture published by The Daily Star yesterday shows a child cooking overlooked by an evidently domesticated locomotive. Interesting and so eloquent of where have we taken and placed our rail-

We demand — we mean this impolite verb — that a commission be set up soon overlording and including all relevant ministries and departments, answerable directly to the Prime Minister, to resuscitate the railways. And this time please no recourse to treating a limb ignoring the whole body. Or the Jessore tragedies would only proliferate and the nation sink some fathoms more.

De-mining the World

Alfred Bernhard Nobel's bequest has had a stirring vindication last Friday when this year's Nobel peace prize went equally to the US-based International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) and its moving force of a coordinator Jody Williams. Some timely messages have been sent reverberating throughout the world by turning the spotlight around a visibly remote but centrally gnawing concern for the 100 million mines lying buried across the world and finishing off or crippling 26,000 people stumbling over them — every year.

In terms of appropriateness, the thematic focus has been impeccably matched by the choice of winners who, in a matter of only half a decade, have been able to make the journey from a 'vision to a feasible reality'.

While welcoming this prestigious international recognition of a vision for the total elimination of landmines and the good work done in this behalf by the likes of Jody Williams and the late Princess Diana to get the warring leaderships 'sensitised' over the issue, we notice the crusade still has some critical distance to cover before de-mining the world. Our own concern stems palpably from the news that a 20 km stretch along our 208 km land border with Myanmar remains dangerously planted with mines.

By choosing the US-based ICBL and its coordinator as the joint awardee, the Nobel Committee has put a powerful message across to the Clinton government that it better sign a mine-banning treaty it had virtually turned its back to — in September. The US administration sought certain changes in the draft that, if effected, would immunise the Korean peninsula as an exception to the ban. The other heavy-weights like China and Russia did not even take part in the Oslo talks where 90 countries authored the draft treaty banning landmines in a historic initiative supported by the ICBL. The will of the majority should prevail.

Disturbing Report

In the three months from July to September '97, there occurred 218 cases of rape, 44 incidents of acid-throwing and 39 cases of dowry-related deaths. These are among other statistics published by the Co-ordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB) that directly show how violence against women continue unabated in our country. These latest figures are not the product of direct investigations of the Council but are based on published reports in newspaper. So the figure we are dealing with grossly understates the extent of the violence against women.

Poverty lies at the root of this problem. But hardly can all the blame be put at its door. A strong case lies against many of our social norms and attitude to which we still prefer to cling in the name of tradition. Let it be said, loud and clear, that not all traditions are worth keeping, just as all modern norms are not worth adopting. Not only from the point of view of fairness and justice, but also from that of growth, prosperity and strengthening democratic norms, we have to change all our attitudes and beliefs that keep women vulnerable to be subjected to rape, acid-throwing and dowry-related killing. No country in the modern world could bring about a sustained growth rate of more than five per cent without bringing the women into the work force and giving them their due place in society. The latest CCHRB report gives a clear picture of how little progress we have made in this direction in spite of having two women prime ministers in succession.

How is Bangladesh Rated Abroad?

False issuing of certificates of origin causing the European countries' cancellation of GSP facilities, which have been wisely withdrawn by the government, and attacks on RMG factories by workers leading to disruption of export orders.

marked by bloodsheds and military dictatorships, the management of politics by the two popularly elected democratic governments since 1991 do not provide a very optimistic scenario. The period from March, 1994 to June, 1996, was a period of extreme political turmoil marked by 170 days of hartal. world. This rating seems to be . killing of more than 90 persons, burning of about 2000 automobiles and other vehicles. destruction of important government establishments, anarchy on the streets and in the government offices etc., leading to slowing down of project implementations, trade and industrial activities and declining foreign reserves of the country. All these could have been avoided if both the government of that period and the opposition were willing to compromise their positions somewhat. The present main opposition party seems to be staging a repeat performance of that same strategy. A number of days of 'hartals' and rallies have been held with considerable violence and adverse effects on the economy followed by announcements of similar further programmes. These seem to be just the warming up sessions for the ensuing winter months of more violent activities. There is no doubt that given the government's present attitude towards the opposition. there will be a lot of street violence and ugly incidents. Suppose the opposition succeeds finally. Then a regular political pattern will be set for the exit of an elected government

HE way the politics and

being, run raises the question

in the minds of its well-

wishers and sympathisers

whether the country is not

consciously or unconsciously

downgrading its own rating

abroad. It goes without saying

that the international rating is

extremely important for a

country if it wants in-

vestments from, or access to.

the market of the outside

on the verge of a decline, if not

already declining, now without

the policy makers and other ac-

tive players in politics, bureau-

cracy and business realising it.

The purpose of this short arti-

cle, however, is to analyse

what factors are contributing

to it. Let it be stated clearly

that the intention of this exer-

cise is to draw attention to a

dire need for some degree of

realism, rationality and na-

tional self-respect in the minds

of all active players in the

fields of political and economic

What Factors Contribute

to Such Ratings?

lending and investment, the

outside world will rate a coun-

try on the basis of both political

and financial risks. It goes

without saying that no matter

how profitable trade or in-

vestment prospects may look

like, if the political situation

is unstable, no investor or

trader would like to deal with

that country. Of course, there

may be some dare-devils in ev-

ery country who are risk lovers

and would be willing to take ex-

treme risks of investing or

trading with any country. But

they might lose heavily in the

end. Therefore, one has to take

into account the assessments of

those who are risk averters or

even risk neutral who want to

minimise or avoid risks. Such

groups of people would like to

deal with a country the gov-

ernment of which can guaran-

tee the repatriation of the for-

eign investors' capital or gov-

ernment's debts to foreign gov-

ernments or international

lending institutions. This

raises the question whether the

political and economic man-

agement of Bangladesh now

appears to be risky to the for-

eigners so as to prevent them

Political Assessment of

the Country

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first two decades which were

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and subject you to a body search

THE Indian political scene

a has surely under gone a

Politically, even if one ig-

freely with the country.

investing or trading

For the purpose of trade,

management of the country.

economics of the country

has been, and still is

subcontinent. However, what looks dangerous is the gradual shortening of the number of years that an elected government can run the affairs of the country during its tenure of five years. The BNP government could run the administration without much troubles only for three years. But this government may not have even three peaceful years before it faces a prolonged street agitation of 1994-96-style and an administrative paralysis. If this kind of political behaviour sets the trend, then the next elected government may be facing a shorter peaceful period of administration. The following government will have a still shorter period. this process of shortening of the peaceful period of administration of an elected government continues over the next

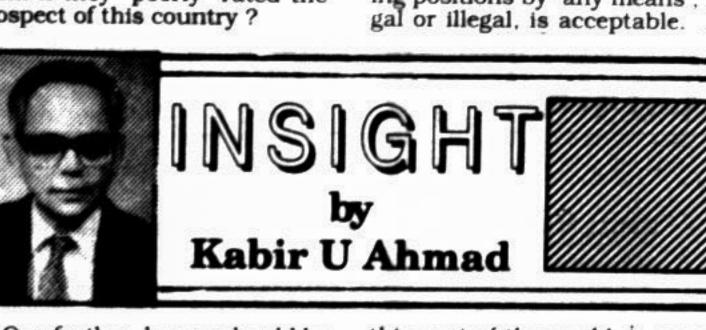
which is not unknown in this

decade or so, one can see that the country will be in a continuously chaotic state unless either sanity dawns on the politicians or military interventions take place or a third effective political force emerges on the political scene. Military takeover has to be ruled out because it will not have the blessings of the foreign donors and it may face bigger trouble at home. One also doesn't see the prospects of a strong democratic third force emerging and effectively controlling the affairs of the country. Therefore, the regular chaotic scenario seems to be the fate of the country. Now the big question is: when foreigners see this chaotic prospect, how would they rate the future of this country? Who could blame them if they poorly rated the prospect of this country?

strike and paralyse the administration, industrial workers attack and vandalise the employers' offices whereby industries are closed down. Who would say that it is a civilised and law abiding society? Who would say that there exists a business friendly environ-Does End Justify the

Means?

From the nature of all the political turmoils and violence as well as the increasingly uncontrollable law and order situation of the country, one is tempted to raise an age-old moral question. Politicians seem to think that getting into. and staying in, power by any means is acceptable. Similarly, making money or holding positions by any means . legal or illegal, is acceptable. In



One further lesson should be drawn from the experiences of 1994-96 political turmoil. That is, the deep involvement of foreigners like the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth as well as the heads of important foreign missions in Dhaka in the internal political affairs of the country. That was out of sheer goodwill. But has it enhanced the self-respect of Bangladesh as an independent country? If the same situation repeats every two years, what will be the assessment of the foreigners about the politicians and the people of this country? Everyone should reflect on this question and find an answer to satisfy his inquisitive mind.

Coming back to the main theme, one should add the current state of law and order situation. The rapidly deteriorating law and order situation. criminal offenses, road accidents, widespread terrorism in the main cities, shopping areas, highways and bus terminals, and raping and killing of innocent girls in custody indicate where the country is heading for. Further, employees in government offices go on

this part of the world, it seems Machiavelli's dictum, popularised through various other ideologies, of "End Justifies the Means" has become the basis of all actions. It is all right if one has to kill people to achieve one's personal objectives. One can then take law in his own hands. Morality and respect for other's life and limb has no place in the scheme and actions of the people. This is nothing but the law of the jungle and animalism. One would humbly appeal to the conscience of all especially the politicians and opinion makers of the country to sit back and reflect for a while where they are driving the country to. To answer the question raised above: End does not justify the means. Means have their own moral and ethical values which have to be held above everything else.

Financial Assessment of the Country

On the financial or economic side, government expenditures have been increasing rapidly while the revenue collection targets are falling behind. As a result, government

borrowing from the banking sector has been very heavy. Due to the government's, especially the Bangladesh Bank's, drive for realisation of the overdue loans, which is certainly commendable, commercial banks' industrial lending has declined substantially. Because of lack of bank loans a lot of industries came to a grinding halt. Facing this situation, recently the government has been trying to arrange separate lending institutions with foreign banks' cooperation for term lending to the industries. A sceptic might say that this will be another government institution which may face the same fate as the BSB and BSRS. But the most critical factors on the economic front are the government's increase of oil prices, fertiliser prices, announced increase of gas and electricity prices, increased pay of government employees and officers totally unrelated to performance efficiency costing the treasury much more than the amount budgeted, shortage of electricity and gas supplies leading to the closure of industries, and increased money supply creating pressures on price levels and he exchange rate. In addition, false issuing of certificates of origin causing the European countries' cancellation of GSP facilities, which have been wisely withdrawn by the government, and attacks on RMG factories by workers leading to disruption of export orders. The combined effects of all these factors is the decline of industrial outputs and pressure on domestic prices and exchange rate. The government sector needed downsizing but it has not even been touched upon. On the contrary, the salary scale has been increased beyond the government's ability to raise revenues. On the side of foreign payment burden, current external debt/GDP ratio has gone over 56 per cent with a decreasing or stagnant external reserve of the country at about \$ 1.6 billion. No wonder, the foreign minister appeals to the US President Bill Clinton for loan forgiveness (on PL 480 account). Given such tight economic and financial state of the economy coupled with poor in-

frastructural facilities and

poor external reserve will in-

duce the foreigners to give

is no surprise to see that for-

eign private investment flows

into the country, in spite of all

Bangladesh a poor rating.

the humdrum, have remained relatively small. There is, of course, the gas sector which has attracted large foreign investments for attractive terms.

Some Concluding Remarks

What should be done? Politically, there is a need for drastic change of attitudes of the major political parties towards each other as well as in their basic philosophy. Instead of mutual hatred and belligerency, there should be some degree of cooperation between the two major political parties in respect of running the administration as well as some common economic and political strategies which are accepted by both. The philosophy of getting into, and staying in, power by any means has to be abandoned. Instead, democratically acceptable means has to be adopted which are already enshrined in the country's constitution. Economically, the government should try to introduce efficiency which is now almost an alien concept, in all its expenditure programmes which calls for downsizing the administration, elimination of wasteful items and retraining of the officials and employees. Rigorous fiscal discipline has to be introduced in the public

Further, there is a need for strengthening the direct tax collecting machinery and control of corruption in all tax collecting agencies. There is a need for decontrolling most of the monopoly structures in the economic activities of the government with a view to promoting the incentive structure of the private sector. The government has to withdraw from all commercial and economic activities. Finally, the government has to understand the interrelated and dynamic effects of its monetary and fiscal policies on the domestic and external sectors and their adjustment mechanism so as to reduce the burden of adjustment on the foreign sector. Strong financial discipline has to be introduced in the government sector especially in its expenditure programmes so that external sector does not have to adjust itself drastically. This will leave the exchange rate and the foreign reserve situation least disturbed and in a state of gradual improvement. Once these latter items are in relatively strong positions. then the world outside will automatically upgrade the country rating and foreign investments will flow in without any scramble for it.

Return of BJP to Power in UP: A Threat to Indian Political Fabric?

by Zaglul A Chowdhury

Indian politicians will do well if they take greater care to face the BJP threats more seriously since the party is capable of turning things upside down.

A drastic change with the return of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power in its most important and populous state Uttar Pradesh. The development is not seen as a mere staging of comeback in the Hindi heartland by a political organisation which is already the largest parliamentary group in the federal parliament, but plagued by its communal overtones it marks a qualitative change in the political milieu. The Uttar Pradesh government headed by chief minister Kalyan Singh and overseen the demolition of the Babri Mosque nearly four years ago and the incident had sent tremors through India sparking off communal riots in many places particularly in the commercial capital Mumbai. It had also immediate repercussions in the neighbourhood as well as in the distant areas like the Middle East. While the Babri Mosque issue had shocked the secular forces even in India, communal forces inside and outside that country also availed of the opportunity to create trouble out of the development. Needless to say, it had also hurt the religious sentiments of those Muslims who are keen to maintain the communal harmony in the South Asian region.

It is Mr Kalyan Singh, who has now returned to power in UP as chief minister of the BJP government after having to quit authority in the aftermath of the Babri Mosque demolition. When the incident took place, India was ruled by secular Congress and prime minister was P V Narashima Rao. How the demolition of an old mosque which was already at the centre of a controversy be-

tween the Hindus and the Muslims, could occur at a time when the Congress government was at the helm in the South Bloc remains a matter of discussions with varying interpretation's even in India itself. Certainly, this occurrence went against the Congress as far as its Muslim vote-bank is concerned in the last general elections. It is sensitivities. not meant to say that alienation of Muslims from the organisation in the wake of the mosque demolition was mainly responsible for the defeat of

Congress in the polls but undoubtedly this factor largely contributed to its debacle. And the party is conscious of this as it was reflected in the final declaration of the organisation in its council session in Calcutta some time ago when the Congress expressed regrets over the demolition of the mosque when it was in power in the centre even though the state of Uttar Pradesh - where the Babri mosque is located in Ayodhya was governed by the BJP. The Narasimha Rao government that time had come out with the explanation that it was

somewhat caught unawares by the turn of events in Ayodhya leading to the tearing off of the mosque by the Hindu zealots. It squarely blamed the state BJP government for the disaster. But the Congress government could not fully shake-off its share of responsibility in a matter which was of paramount

importance not only for the interest of secular India but also for Indian image abroad. This feeling has haunted the party for long and it gave vent to its sentiments in the Calcutta gathering of the organisation. After all, the Congress cannot afford to be seen as a party turning a blind eye to the minority

The political pattern of Uttar Pradesh state has been quite interesting in the recent years. particularly following the demolition of the 16th century mosque which Moghul emperor Babur built, but many Hindus say the site was the birth place of Lord Rama. The state is very important in the Indian political system since its sends 85 members to the 542-member lower house of parliament (Lokshaba), the largest by any state. In the process, generally it has a big say in the federal system of governance and most of the prime ministers of the country including Pundit Jawarlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Sastri, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi hailed from this state. Although the present prime minister Inder Kumar Gujral is from Punjab, the UP has a number of heavyweights in the United Front government including Mr Mulayam Singh Yaday, the defence minister.

The Uttar Pradesh has been in a flux politically for last few years and the state Vidhan Shaba elections have failed to

produce a single party to rule the state or gave no ascendancy to any organisation to hold sway. Most part of the last few years was marked by federal rule from the centre in the form of Governor's administration. Mr Ramesh Bhandari, a former foreign secretary, who was Governor of the small but sensitive Tripura state, was called in to become the Governor of the important UP and it is he who ruled the roost in the state in recent times. When the last state elections failed to give any decisive result to any party, some strange polarisation eventually developed as regards alliance among the political parties and widely seen as communal BJP came in collusion with an organisation BSP (Bahiyan Samaj Party) — that has championed the causes of minorities and the downtrodden. When BSP supremo Kanshi Ram forged an alliance with the BJP and his close associate MS Mayawati became the chief minister, it raised eyebrows in many quarters. But once again in politics such coming together of the diametrically opposite forces is not uncommon despite attracting criticisms. Kanshi Ram's main rival is

the Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav — both are leaders of small organisations which, however, have strong influence in UP and following among the minorities and weaker sections of the society.

During the good days, two leaders had come together to win state polls in UP and formed the government inflicting defeats to Congress, Janata Dal and the BJP but they later parted ways and not surprisingly, are now bitter rivals. When Kanshi Ram's party and BJP formed the state government early this year with the secular UF government at New Delhi, obviously federal government's ties with the state authority were not good and moreover, Mulayam Singh Yadav being a key figure in the central government, the relationship turned worse. However, Kanshi Ram and chief minister Mayawati kept on telling people their party remained committed to looking after the interest of the minorities and their party had bigger say in the running of the coalition government. But this situation could not continue for long since BJP is eyeing to capture power in New Delhi in he next polls and to achieve that objective, control over UP appeared important for the BJP. No wonder, the BJP has now gained the ascendancy in the UP politics as the party has played its cards well and Kalyan Singh is the chief minister of the state much to the charging of the Congress, UF and other secular forces.

But it is not so much the return of BJP to power in UP but some of the remarks of the new chief minister that has raised

India. His comments that he has no regrets over the demolition of the mosque when he was in power, and the plans to construct "Ram Mandir" at the site remaining intact, threatened to cause fresh strains in Indian communal fabric. Understandably, the federal government is irked by his comments, and the Congress which supports the UF government is also disturbed by such remarks. The leftists, who are in the 13-party UF that rules the country, has come out with strong views against the comments of BJP chief minister. The BJP — despite its communal character — has liberals in the organisations like former prime minister A B Vajpayee but hardliners want to cash in on the plans to build the temple at the demolished mosque site as a strategy to woo the overwhelmingly Hindu population. The moderates in the party are against such moves and seek to assure the minorities that they are secure under the BJP, but the hawks are very much for going ahead with their policies.

or display gross

alarms in several quarters in

Most of the major political parties in India are secular and prime minister Gujral and others are well-known for this outlook. But BJP is a strong force in India and Indian politicians will do well if they take greater care to face the BJP threats more seriously since the party is capable of turning things upside down. The comeback of BJP to power in UP should not be allowed by the secular forces in India to whip up communal sentiments. The UF should and Congress leaders are well aware of this and, hopefully, they can combat the BJP treats by drawing a pragmatic political strat-

BTV — A rolling stone

Sir, Ever since the decision for two-day weekly holiday was taken by the present government, I had always a confusion in my mind that how long it would have remained in force. However being a banker I welcome this decision when Bangladesh bank, who was given the liberty to fix timing for the scheduled banks decided to keep the banks closed for two days a week in accordance with the decision.

Bangladesh Television (BT-V), which is supposed to be a very strong public medium but ironically very confused all the time, found themselves in a fix to fix their schedule for the viewers who have now got a plenty of time to spare in front of TV. So BTV started rescheduling their programme with a view to maximise the possibility of entertaining the viewers. They kept on and ended up with the decision to telecast the 'Movie of the week' on Saturday morning, at 10.30am to be ex-

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Bank, considering the welfare of the business community has decided to keep the banks open on Saturday, which means many bankers like me will be missing the 'Movie of the week', one of the very few quality pro-

grammes that BTV has to offer. Now if the BTV authority thinks that who cares for the bankers, then I have nothing to say. But if they really care for the interest of all sections of the society, then all option should be weighed before taking any plunge.

Esha Mahbub 2/1, North Adabar Shyamali, Dhaka

Orphan

Sir, An aged woman perhaps in her 50s was crying in the street and shouting: "I am an orphan. I am an orphan". When asked by the passers-by, why was she an orphan has she not anybody to look after her, she

replied "Yes, yes I have my husband, I have my son. I have my daughter and also a newly-born grand-daughter, still I am an orphan".

The passers-by again said, "You have all kith and kins around you, then why are you carrying the label of orphan-

"Oh men! you know, actually don't have my father, I don't have my mother and brother. Who can be a greater orphan than me?"

Nur Hossain 151, Bangshal Road

Dhaka

Telephone on demand

Sir, Some government agencies doing business (not essential) are too slow, year after year, in meeting the demand of some service, such as a new telephone connection. The ministry concerned (not BTTB the operators) may inform the public has to wait for how many

and other woes

decades or years to enjoy 'telephone on demand' service; and why this waiting period cannot be shortened in these days of open marketing and competition? This go-slow policy is not

at all clear.

The second complaint is about corruption, bribery and nepotism in the operator's organisation, which show no sign of decreasing; coupled with the enigmatic silence of the policy makers. Has the regulatory body also collapsed?

The third point is the bungling of the cellular service by the private operators. A lot of complaints are appearing in the press of problems in interfacing and system design. BTTB is keeping mum over the subscribers' woes. Where do we go for redress?

Why the ministry, as a regulator, cannot control the BTTB; and why the setting up of the independent regulatory body is being delayed? This is not a new-fangled idea being introduced for the first time in the world, and Bangladesh is certainly not a guinea pig.

airlines. The Indonesian Em-The present regime talk tall

on political 'isms', but in practice it is hopelessly inefficient. The systems loss in the power sector is another nightmare. RAJUK is a white elephant. The DCC has collapsed, like the DSE. The financial market is not at all healthy, led by the loan defaulters. The new exports-oriented factories are being destroyed by hired hoodlums — and the authorities are not even reactive! The CBAs are running parallel administrations and the authorities are abetting! Is this the image of the public service by those voted into power? The credibility and the image are deteriorating fast. The public won't stand it much

A Zabr Dhaka

Garuda

Sir, The air-crash that occured in Indonesia has unfortunately killed 234 people. The aircraft belonged to Garuda, the national airlines of Indonesia.

That reminds me of the naming of Indonesia's national

bassy in Pakistan, in the early days of its opening at Karachi the then capital of Pakistan, used to publish a weekly newsletter titled Mardeka. Some time in 1948/49, I read in that newsletter that Indonesian government has launched an airline of its own and has named it Garuda. The reason mentioned for such naming was that Garuda is the mightily, fast-flying personal carrierbird of god Vishnu and as such the authorities have chosen that auspicious name for their national airlines!

'The Garuda has an exalted position in Thailand. It is the emblem on the Royal standard of Thailand. Some centuries ago, the King of Siam was considered to be an earthly incarnation of Vishnu (of Hinduism). But why in Indonesia? It is a Muslim-majority country, the largest Muslim country in the world. Has the Garuda with its mighty wings over-shadowed the Indonesians' Islamic concepts?

Razi-ud-Din Qureshi Uttara, Dhaka