

Ties with Islamabad

Sharif-Hasina meet in the sequel to the Three-Nation Business Summit has certainly helped Bangla-Pak relations to be buoyed up from the somewhat routine pattern these had gone into. This freshening up of the bilateral mood has seemingly been made possible partly by the liberalised atmosphere fostered in the wake of the tri-nation summit and partly because of a perception shared by Sheikh Hasina and Nawaz Sharif that they must let their two countries' relationship come of age.

No highest-level contact between Pakistan and Bangladesh has ever passed off without a reference drawn to the asset-sharing and Behari repatriation issues dating back to our country's birth. For a full flowering of the bilateral relationship these questions will have to be resolved in an amicable manner at the earliest. The ball has remained in Islamabad's court. Who else than Nawaz Sharif can play it adroitly?

Geographical distance does not admit any direct inter-penetration of the economies of Bangladesh and Pakistan. It is by means of policy tools that they must be networking for a spurt in trade and investment activism. The trade balance is favourable to Pakistan and there is a plethora of goods that it can import from Bangladesh to help bridge the gap provided, of course, it lowers its tariff walls. Both India and Pakistan are yet to liberalise their tariffs to the extent Bangladesh, a smaller country, has already done. Pakistan Finance Minister Sartaz Aziz has promised at a colloquium of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) on Friday that Islamabad is ready to extend preferential treatment to Bangladeshi goods. He would be only going an extra mile for Bangladesh should Pakistan start according that preferential treatment before the free trade area is fully established.

The business communities of the two countries need to interact through exchange of trade and investment delegations under the auspices of their respective chamber bodies, let alone those organised by their governments. This is now mostly happening at the individual level rather than group-wise and programmatically. We are waiting for the Joint Economic Commission to give a definite direction to bilateral cooperation not only in matters of trade but also joint venture projects.

The agreement on promotion of cultural programmes is another indication of a positive outlook shared between Dhaka and Islamabad in their relationship.

Where are We Going?

Are we on a libidinal trip? Women are being molested right and left. A month has gone since Ferdousi of Chandpur was allegedly raped and killed by students of a madrassah. The other day, Suchitra at Serajganj was gangraped in front of her husband before the group led by her rejected proposer chose the most violent method one can think of to kill the couple. And all this is happening because of the unrequited male advances towards these unfortunate women. No man in love would engineer a gangrape or murder of the lady he is or ever was in love with.

We are alarmed at this wave of terror unleashed upon women in general across the country. Apparently there is only one way left to counter it. We have to instill fear in the minds of all would-be rapists. We believe time has come to declare death sentence as the punishment for physical assault on women. And mere announcement would not do. The government has to make special effort to implement it.

Ours being such an overwhelmingly male-dominated society, it is likely that the formal and newspaper consciousness about repression against women will never quite percolate the administration. Man has to see through a woman's eyes to be able to do any kind of justice to all sorts of protest against repression against woman — he has to emotionally accommodate the trauma a woman goes through if she at all survives it. Admittedly, this will not happen in a day. But the process has to begin here and now. We had suggested earlier and we reiterate it here again that resistance to these criminal inclinations has to evolve from smaller orbits. Parents have to develop a watchdog attitude over the behaviour over their male children. Also a system of effective community consciousness has to be evolved presently in tandem with governmental awareness over the issue.

Postal Service in Ruins

The complain has been there in the air for a long time. Perhaps it has not been backed by the same resonance and frequency. That is eminently explainable. Accountability is a meaningless notion in the public sector of this country. Besides, we have become so used to the culture of being robbed of our privileges that we don't care any more.

Country's Postal Department is not the only government office that will never get a certificate from a client on his or her own volition. Its service has been a source of perennial annoyance for anyone in need of it. Although there has never been the dearth of dedicated postmen like *Dinu daak harkara*, the operative system of this office has been subject to degeneracy and corruption of unthinkable proportions over time. Recently, a Bangla daily has given insight into the new level of corruption inside the post office that is affecting the clientele and the society in general.

Inordinate delay in the distribution of letters has long gone out of fashion! Neither letters opened till too obviously is a source of bother any more. Not long ago Gordon Greenidge, country's cricket coach and a bona fide citizen of Bangladesh now, went to the press with his exasperation in this regard. The leading Bangla daily now cites cases where bank drafts are getting lost frequently. How they are being encashed in the market is an altogether different story of corruption in and around the banks, but the allegation aired is a terrible one. The utterly evasive reaction of the newly appointed Post Master General is shocking. We counsel him to view the matter not only as a source of public grievance but also as one of national loss. It may not be in his reach to fix things on his own but there is a lot he can do by his initiative to get the government review the reality.

Nineteen Ninety-eight: Reason to Hope?

While there may certainly be practical difficulties in implementing reforms through the broad spectrum, pragmatic changes are needed to change the destiny of the country.

HAVING lived through a traumatic 1997, do we have reason to hope for a better 1998? If we continue to repeat the mistakes of the past year than 1998 will certainly be far worse. If our political leadership learns from their own mistakes as well as those committed by their predecessor PPP coalition and the Caretakers who followed them (albeit for a short period), we certainly have reason to hope. One can live on the fountain of hope, one cannot survive on hope alone. There has to be positive activism with a constant check kept both on the style and content of our government that will feed our hopes and aspirations.

Given parliamentary brute majority, PML candidate Mamnoon Hussain (Reid) Rafiq Tarar was duly elected and sworn in as President. The Courts have still got to pass judgment on his alleged contempt of court. One does not see him evading disqualification, condoning his remarks may set an unhealthy precedent for the judiciary future. The PM will be far better off if the President survives only shortly otherwise he will remain a focus of controversial attention that will distract the functioning of the government to alleviate the economic sufferings of the people of Pakistan. If Justice Tarar survives as President, Pakistani will be hardput to survive Tarar.

The country desperately needs macro and micro reforms across the broad spectrum of the whole structure in Pakistan. The macro reforms must follow a comprehensive national census, the most important being, viz (1) local bodies elections (2) majority vote, runoff elections (3) proportional representation and women participation (4) direct elections (5) dovetailing education with population planning (6) smaller

government (7) reducing and decentralising taxation (8) direct linkage between taxation and spending and (9) accountability/justice at grassroots level. With respect to micro reforms, the most important are (1) re-structuring the police station and the police (2) bringing private sector participation in all the service sectors and (3) private sector monitoring of all government functions. A myriad other reforms are needed but these must take place in Dubai for handling/services of various kind, \$15 is spent on the sea trip to Pakistan's/Iran's coast including under-the-table payment to various official agencies and \$15 approximately for transit from the coast to its destination. By keeping an official import duty slab of 15 per cent and adding \$15 for every \$100 for onward transit to destination, Karachi would have a competitive edge of \$15 in every \$100 over Dubai.

Now all these are approximate calculations but even a cursory estimate will show that

the people at the grassroots level by holding Local Bodies elections. In order to make the Local Bodies truly representative these must be held on slate basis i.e. the first ten candidates in order of voting priority must be elected with the one commanding the most votes to be the Chairperson. This would ensure that almost everybody in a constituency has a voice on the Body, very necessary to encourage community participation in government. All candidates for higher bodies must be a member of the Local Bodies at the lowest tier so that one can

have more than 5 per cent of the votes cast. The present separate electorate for minorities is a sick joke and must be done away with. In this manner we will bring women and minorities into parliament, care taken to ensure that those appointed on PR bases must have been elected at the grassroots level in the Local Bodies election. Most of the powers must be exercised by the Local Bodies or next higher tier, bureaucrats must function only as advisors and auditors. Making government decentralised and smaller. By decentralising and reducing taxation, more taxes will be collected because the local elected representatives will correctly assess the taxpaying potential. A direct linkage between taxation and spending will ensure that at least a part of the citizen's hard-earned money is directly being utilised for his benefit. Last but not the least, we must cater for population planning, depending upon inter-acting with education in convincing our masses that smaller families will mean that demand does not exceed supply.

The Local Thana being a den of evil is shunned by most of the citizens as a profound place of fear and petty tyranny. No self-respecting male or female would like to visit this place unless we make it an oasis of peace. To increase efficiency we must have an Operations Division and a Human Resources Division with a magistrate available around the clock. Representatives of the Local Bodies must sit in the Thana premises to act as adjudicators of problems of the community so that the police role is mainly confined to crime prevention and detection, their gross interference for their own monetary

AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

Pakistan will be able to earn more revenues than it does today. More important the official exchequer will earn a lot more by providing services in Pakistan instead of smuggling. This will have a force-multiplier effect on the economy that will in turn snowball revenues. There may be an initial dampening effect on our industry but we cannot continue to protect inefficient and uneconomical units at the cost of the nation. Enough revenues will be generated to revamp the entire socio-economic infrastructure including the utilities and related services. Guess who will oppose it? Only those who are making the most money out of this impossible situation and stand to lose their windfall illegal gains!

Power must be given back to

Prime Ministers Have Right of Way

The stillness of the multitude around me is ominous. It is almost surreal. Like animals sensing an oncoming storm, they appear to have a sixth sense which has told them that this gridlock will not unlock.

They are remarkably silent. No one blows their horn; no one gesticulates or waves their fists in anger. Rickshaw-wallas slump forward and wait. Lorry drivers doze off. Private car drivers look bored with life. Even pedestrians stop weaving in and out of traffic.

DON'T get me wrong. I'm not complaining. All I am saying is that prime ministers are entitled to first-hand experiences — just like the rest of us.

Let me explain.

I think it is wonderful that Dhaka played host to the first ever Business Summit between the prime ministers of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It was a bold, innovative and well-conceived step, an event whose time has come. That the entire project was created and executed by Bangladesh makes it doubly exciting, and a great source of pride for us in this country.

So what do I appear to be cribbing about? Okay, I'll tell you about it. But in order to understand my point of view, you must first visualise my particular mother of traffic jams.

It is Thursday morning; I have just come back from a three-week holiday and I am happy to be back. Life is exciting in this city. Sure, it gets a little crazy at times. This is a tiny, crowded city, unbelievably polluted and noisy to boot. But Dhaka beckons like no other city I know.

It is possible that I was too happy. Perhaps that is why it bothered me so much when it happened. There is little warning, you see.

One moment my driver is scooting along towards downtown Dhaka, dodging old ladies and lorry drivers, and the next moment, he cannot move. At first I don't pay attention. When a handicapped old man with a

young child holding his hand knocks hard on the car window, I wake up from my stupor, as it were, and it begins to dawn on me that we aren't moving. We haven't been moving for some time. I look at my watch. We must have been standing still for about 10 minutes. We are in a traffic jam.

You know what terrifies me at this point? It is a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me that things are highly unlikely to change in the near future. This here is the mother of traffic jams.

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plane to catch in a couple of hours. Nothing happens. I start sweating.

I roll down the car window and ask the lorry driver next to us what's up. Does he know why we're not moving? The lorry driver stares at me, saying nothing.

It's those prime ministers, they've snarled up traffic, what do they care what happens to

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