

An Engineering Marvel

The earth's 11th longest bridge came into existence in Bangladesh when the last segment on the Jangbandhu Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge was joined on Monday to the Bhuapur approach road by cementing a two metre gap between the two. The more important aspect of the great job is that in perhaps millions of years the two landmasses of Varendra and Bangla were by this multifaceted achievement connected as if by an isthmus or a land-bridge.

Constant striving will be the price of making the bridge into the fulcrum of economic leap it was designed to be. And let us hope this by far the biggest undertaking of all in our nation's history — at 40 billion Taka — delivers by putting into gear a qualitative change in our national endeavours on the economic front yielding a substantial jump in the per capita production rate as well as investment-production ratio. An index to the bridge's performance will be the time it takes to pay off the 40 billion taka investment.

We are confident that best of studies have ensured that this will be a river-friendly encroachment on the Jamuna. Unflinching vigil will have to be mounted to keep it so guarding against its not-possible degeneration into an ecological nightmare.

Sirajganj is already more than half way to becoming the nation's third or fourth biggest economic centre, all thanks to the bridge. This recovery of Sirajganj as the great port it was over the whole of the British colonial times, will entail new initiative and enterprise to be engendered by tens of thousands. Price accretions of land and consequent rise of thousands of millionaires will be of little consequence to national economy unless this new wealth sees productive investment.

This, however, does signify an important, perhaps sad, passage of the national ethos from a river-oriented one to a landbound other. BJMPB is all right but let us not turn our back to the rivers.

Mighty engineering work it has been, and a model of efficiency, finishing the first-segment-to-the-last job in just nine months. Hats off to the designers and organisation developers and controllers, field engineers and other workforce. Thanks to the donors. Just come to think of a five-kilometre bridge with 49 pillars supporting a concrete and steel deadweight of 106 thousand tons divided into 1214 segments. One cannot help marveling that it is made in Bangladesh.

World Meteorological Day

Yesterday was World Meteorological Day. This year's theme was weather, ocean and human activity. While weather and ocean enjoy a more orthodox relationship with meteorology, human activity features in as a rather novel yet highly relevant factor. Meteorology can no longer be viewed as an isolated study of weather pattern or the pelagic data. Human activity has been featuring increasingly as a contributing factor in the phenomena like global warming, rise in the sea level. The need for extensive studies in meteorology today is greater than any time before not only for immediate risk minimising purposes like weather forecasting but also for a grasp of the climatic aberrations. We need more investment in meteorology, both in terms of money and mind in order to secure the future of our planet. It does man's scientific achievement little credit that his journey into the third millennium has not yet been marked by any significant headway into nature's whimsicality. Attributing the sequence of disastrous natural phenomena around the globe to El Nino is all that the scientific studies have succeeded in doing so far.

Although a plain land, Bangladesh's weather pattern is remarkably volatile. As a country with such a long history of nature's adversity, ours should have been a leadership role in meteorological study. Unfortunately that has not been the case. How appallingly low our sensitivity is in this area becomes clear in the fact that we do not have even a Richter scale to measure seismic intensity. It is shameful nonchalance with which these issues are swept under the carpet. Not that the reasons for this callousness is too abstruse for comprehension. The equation is simple for the people who lead the country: meteorology is too rarefied in common man's imagination to make a direct impact on the vote fortune. This is how people look at it. It would take significant shift in the governmental attitude for the World Meteorological Day to grow out of its mere ritual existence.

An ADB Assessment

ADB in a recent memorandum to the government has portrayed a mixed-bag situation of the economy. But the plus points seem out weighed by the minus points. The findings are that during the first six months of the year industrial output increased and so did export earnings, the latter chiefly because of good garments sales. On the flipside, revenue receipts fell short of target by 8 per cent. If this negative trend continues then at the year-end fiscal deficit could assume critical proportions.

The foreign exchange reserve is not sufficient to meet the import bill of even three months, a condition which makes us a fit case for IMF's balance of payments support. But even this critical forex position could worsen if as a result of reduced Aman harvest early this year we go shopping for foodgrains overseas.

The standard recipe for replenishing dwindling forex reserve is three-fold. First, there has to be speedy implementation of aided projects to take the lid off further aid disbursements. Secondly, new projects will have to be quickly approved or adopted. Thirdly, there should be an effective devaluation of local currency to enhance the country's export competitiveness. However, that way lie higher import costs too. Needless to say, our project implementation rate should be faster but this does not preclude the necessity for the multi-lateral financial institutions to expedite things on their side.

Economic Growth and Political Commitment

Economic growth strongly deserves steadfast political commitment manifested through proper understanding of what is to be done first and foremost followed by a deep-seated conviction to relentlessly pursue those priorities of development.

A member of parliament is interested to promote development of his local constituency. This is fairly obvious. However, his perception of development is the critical factor. It would be heavily influenced by the course of local development. If you add up all the 300 constituencies, it should determine the course of development of the country itself.

A long standing member of parliament (MP) told me that he had established one collage, two high schools and several madrassahs in his area. He has managed to get the rural health centre building completed. Today, with the collage, schools, madrassahs and the rural health centre — all new buildings at the centre of his constituency — in fact the members own village now looks like a small town. There is electricity from REB as well. The MP felt that he has brought about development of his constituency. He felt assured of victory at the next election in 2001.

But is this development in the right direction? Will the expenditures incurred within the constituency contribute toward economic growth?

If so, to what extent? First, the so-called development expenditures in education had been in favour of higher education and its contribution in enhancing the literacy level may not be significant at all. Instead, if efforts were made in promoting primary education and a functional literacy pro-

gramme for the adult, the overall literacy level would have been enhanced. Rural high schools and colleges contribute more to unemployed youth who are literate with an aversion towards manual work. Their contribution to economic growth tends to be negative. The huge number of drop-outs from the system of higher education has created an explosive situation since they lack the technical qualifications for gainful employment. On the other hand, a literate farmer will produce a higher yield. A graduate from a vocational school can set up a workshop and produce farm implements as well as numerous other products useful to the farming community.

Education and development has a very intimate relationship and in order to maximise the contribution of education to development, the priority ought to be in favour of primary education and adult education so that as quickly as possible, universal literacy is achieved. Three hundred such programmes under the leadership of the members of parliament can bring in a revolutionary change and it would truly reflect the commitment to development by the most important group of individuals of the country.

The rural health centre is necessary no doubt. But in our country, priority should be in favour of preventive healthcare through pure water supply and sanitation, vaccination for all, health education and family planning programmes. Simple and extremely cheap Orsoline can prevent many more deaths than all the rural health centres combined.

The cost of mass vaccination compared to benefits is

activities are well utilised and act as a catalyst to enhance private sector investment in agriculture.

It should be noted that rural electrification for the purpose of reaching the benefits to a limited number of large landowners' households would have a very limited impact. It is necessary to ensure that electricity is running the irrigation pumps and facilitating the growth of rural industries, in

should be understood. The tasks involved cannot be completed through a one-man effort — within the limited span of five years, coinciding with the tenure of the MPs. What is necessary is strong institutional development, in particular, local government institutions at all appropriate levels. In this respect, Union Councils are only the beginning; it may be immediately followed by effective Thana Councils and then the District Councils as the apex entity of a three-tier local government system. Local development must be promoted locally. This is the universal truth which we tend to ignore in Bangladesh since the MPs are concerned of losing their local influence and authority. Perhaps universal literacy is also not their objective since it may lead to the growth of new leaders at the grassroots level. Also curative healthcare is important for the rural elite; therefore there must be a health centre instead of a more vigorous preventive healthcare programme. Political leaders are more concerned with the physical manifestation of development — concrete structures and no darkness after sunset in those buildings. An effective Thana Council is not a visible entity. Therefore it becomes politically

unimportant. Since 1972, Members of Parliament were never in favour of a strong local government network. Although disbursements were made without number, the old district council buildings located at former headquarters of large districts with sub-divisions are all waiting to be turned into ghosts — if not fossilised already during the last 25 years. Elected Upazilla parishads were constituted during 1980s. Later on, Parliament took one of the rare unanimous decision to abolish the institution. It was a great setback.

Upazilla (a better name than a Thana) possess the right size and population to be a viable local development unit for design, planning and implementation. MPs must realise that without strong local government institutions, local development at the desirable speed and scale can never be maintained. The much cherished desire of the MPs to give an urban look to their village constituency will therefore remain a mirage.

What I am referring to basically are the political limitations to economic growth. The political leaders themselves must overcome them. Economic growth is strongly desired, steadfast political commitment manifested through proper understanding of what is to be done first and foremost followed by a deep-seated conviction to relentlessly pursue those priorities of development.



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

next to nothing. Nutrition information can vastly improve health and prevent many disease including loss of vital eye sight at a cost which is affordable to the majority of rural households.

A significant commitment to development by members of parliament will be their active role in promoting agricultural production through irrigation, crop diversification, HYV seeds, animal healthcare, intensive rural aquaculture, etc. They can see to it that government resources allocated to all these

particular agro-processing. The MPs must be convinced that location of government offices, a college and a school — all with electricity — would neither create a town nor bring about real development. There ought to be economic growth and for that, agriculture must grow along with more processing, improved supplies and services.

The leadership role in agriculture and rural development is crucial and MPs are in a position to fulfill the critical gap in this respect. However, the right context of that leadership

LETTER FROM AMERICA

War Drums are Beating in Kosovo

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Like a protagonist in a Greek tragedy, Milosevic has come full circle to confront the ghosts he unleashed. He is risking renewed international sanctions as he attempts to crush the budding rebellion by the province's ethnic Albanian majority, the Kosovars.

DANGER lurks for the Danway at the front line of conflicting civilisations, and at the fault line of religions. Human morality being so fickle, changing political winds easily transform humans into Frankensteins; making them discard the facade of civilisation, and turning one's neighbour into his tormentor. The Christian man suddenly sees not the gentle demeanor of his life long Muslim friend, but only another nameless, feckless, detestable Muslim face. Unencumbered by the fear of the consequences, the Christian boy next door, rapes the Muslim girl next door. Plot of an intricate novel? No. The world saw it all happen in Bosnia less than three years ago. It is about to happen all over again in Kosovo, Serbia's Muslim island, surrounded by a sea of hostile Orthodox Christian Serbs.

Stunned by the collapse of communism in 1989-91, the world was either too complacent or smug to care about the disintegrating Yugoslavia in its beginning. "We want a united Yugoslavia", the US Secretary James Baker had said quite thoughtlessly, emboldening the Serbian dictator, Slobodan Milosevic. When the war actually started, Baker compounded his earlier folly by stating, "the US does not have a horse in this one." The consequences were devastating for the Muslims of Bosnia. Over 30,000 Muslim women were raped, over 200,000 Muslim men, women and children were murdered, and over 2 million Muslims were uprooted from their homes via "ethnic cleansing".

Last week's massacre of 85 Muslim men, women and children in Kosovo was expected; nay, the world was waiting for it. The perpetrators are the same — the Serbs — the world's favourite repugnant thugs; modern day reincarnates of the unrepentant Nazis. Is the world's reaction going to be any different this time? Perhaps. Are the Serbs going to be punished more severely? Certainly not.

Look at what the Bosnian Serbs achieved by their murderous rampage in Bosnia between 1991 and 1995. Before the war, 44 per cent of the Bosnians were Muslims, 34 per cent (Orthodox Christians) Serbs, and 22 per cent (Catholic Christians) Croats. Yet, the Dayton accord of 1995 gave the Serbs 49 per cent of the land in Bosnia, as well as a de facto state, the Bosnian Serb republic. The Muslims and their dubious "allies" the Croats received only 51 per cent of the land. Since the world has demonstrated to the Serbs that crime pays, the Serbs are not about to mend their criminal ways. In case anyone doubted what the Serbs thought of world's condemnation of the Kosovo massacre, Serb police threw 53 of the murdered

corpses into a mass grave and bulldozed over it, depriving the grieving families of a proper Muslim Janaza for the dead! Angry Muslims later dug up the graves, recovered the bodies and buried them properly.

Kosovo is a "sacred" place for the Serbs and the Serbian politicians. The Ottoman Turks defeated an army of Serbian knights on a barren field here more than six centuries ago, and the Serbs have commemorated their martyrdom ever since in poetry and song. This is the hallowed ground that Slobodan Milosevic chose to begin his transformation even a Communist bureaucrat to a nationalist leader. The fierce Serbian nationalism unleashed by Milosevic in a 1987 speech here began his career as a popular politician, and fueled the wars that resulted in the break up of Yugoslavia.

Like a protagonist in a Greek tragedy, Milosevic has come full circle to confront the ghosts he unleashed. He is risking renewed international sanctions as he attempts to crush the budding rebellion by the province's ethnic Albanian majority, the Kosovars. President Bush had warned Milosevic eight years ago that violence against the Kosovars who make up 90 per cent of Kosovo's population, could lead to military intervention. The fear now is that the fighting could spread across borders. Albania's ragtag army could be drawn into a war with Serbia to protect Albanian kin in Kosovo from Serbian annihilation. Restive ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and Montenegro could join a revolt, perhaps drawing in Greece and Turkey, even Bulgaria (Greece and Russia supported Milosevic's action). That is why the Balkan Contact Group (the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia) has tried to rein in Serbia by hastily imposing some mild sanctions.

That is not enough. Slap on the wrist, or pinprick strikes do not deter Milosevic. He only understands massive force. Unless the UNSC imposes an immediate economic and arms embargo on Milosevic and the US threatens to bomb him, once again he will indulge in his favourite pastime — ethnic cleansing — in Kosovo. Presiding over an economically devastated nation with rampant unemployment, Milosevic has much to lose if he loses Kosovo. On the other hand, he can reap political rewards if he follows a tough line against the Kosovars, provided it is not so tough that others are

forced to intervene. Milosevic has played the Kosovo card successfully before. In his 1987 speech, he said while the Serbs were the largest ethnic group in Yugoslavia, they were being cheated out of their fair share of jobs and economic bounty in Kosovo. Few Serbs lived in Kosovo, therefore Milosevic imported Serbs into the province and handed them the government. The Serb-controlled press was running incendiary articles about the plight of the Serbs, highlighting fictitious accusations of rape and beatings.

Milosevic militantly declared in Kosovo that other ethnic groups would no longer be permitted to abuse the Serbs. He vowed a government dominated by the Serbs and a Yugoslavia that served Serbian interests. He evoked ancient myths and glory, pointing to do the landscape increasingly devoid of Serbs. It played well on the deep xenophobia of the Serbs, who after 500 years of Ottoman rule had come to worship warrior-saints and distrust all foreigners. It also offered them a way out of the needling question of coexistence with other ethnic groups — which the Yugoslav communist dictator Marshall Tito, a Croat, had enforced with considerable personal authority, and a ruthless police force.

The bellicosity of the Serbs, not surprisingly, deeply frightened the Slovenes, the Croats, Muslims, Macedonians and the Kosovars, who had had their fill of Serbian hegemony, under the Serbian monarchy that ruled between the two world wars. Events pushed those ethnic politicians who spoke of cooperation with Belgrade into irrelevance. As Milosevic rose to power among the Serbs, nationalist leaders from a competing ethnic group rose alongside with him.

As he had promised, Milosevic did turn the state over to the Serbian nationalists. He revoked the limited autonomy and self-rule granted by the communists to the ethnic groups, including the Kosovars. In Kosovo, the independence movement did not follow the script of elsewhere: armed rebellion. Milosevic's forces kept a tight lid on unrest for nearly eight years. As the rest of Yugoslavia burned, a deceptive calm prevailed in Kosovo. At the insistence of their President Ibrahim Rugova, Kosovars mounted a disciplined and nonviolent resistance. They set up a shadow

government, complete with schools and clinics. They collected their own taxes. Diplomas and certificates were granted from the yet to be recognised Republic of Kosovo. All contact with the Serbians, who now live in isolated and well-guarded villages and neighbourhoods, have been severed. Soon the Kosovars realised that nonviolent protest works only against civilised societies — such as Mahatma Gandhi's against the British in India, or Dr. Martin Luther King's against America — it does not work against rogue states. Failure to get concession from Belgrade combined with the decision at the Dayton peace accord of 1995 to ignore the plight of the Kosovo Albanians, made the Kosovars angry and frustrated.

The growth of the armed wing of that frustration, Kosovo Liberation Army, and its increasingly daring attacks over the last year have captured the imagination of the many young Kosovars. An increasing number of ethnic Albanians have stopped speaking Serbo-Croatian language. Their only con-

tact with the Serbs is being stopped and often abused by heavily armed policemen, wearing bullet-proof vests. Among all the government employees in Serbia, Milosevic pays only these policemen and paramilitary units regularly.

According to the New York Times, it was the United States special Balkan envoy Robert Gelbard's recent remark that triggered the current crack-down. On a visit to Belgrade last month, Mr. Gelbard praised Milosevic for his cooperation in Bosnia, and branded the Kosovo Liberation Army, "without question a terrorist group."

The statement stunned the Kosovars and reminded them of the Secretary of State James Baker's assertion in 1991 that Yugoslavia should remain one nation. Baker's comment was construed by Milosevic as a green light to suppress the Croatian separatist movement. Gelbard's comment encouraged him to do likewise in Kosovo. Since then, Gelbard has retracted, calling Milosevic the architect of all that is wrong in Kosovo.

Fortunately for the civilised world, tyrants and rogue states make at least one stupid mistake, that saves the world. Hitler attacked Russia, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and the Bosnian Serbs shot down American pilot Scott O'Grady, and tried to kill him. Wait for Milosevic to make his.

If the Kosovars play their cards right, they can get their own state. First of all, they must insist on independence, not "more autonomy", as the West would like them to settle for. (The last thing the West wants is one more independent Muslim nation.) The Serbs know that they have lost the greater war. More importantly, they have had it with Milosevic. His promise of "Greater Serbia" has only brought them misery and a lesser Serbia. They are not about to risk their lives and whatever meager resources they have left for a province that is 90 per cent non-Serb.

Milosevic, however, can ill-afford to lose Kosovo, because it would be his ultimate defeat. That will remove from under his feet the only platform he used to launch his murderous reign of terror. So far he has 400,000 angry Serb refugees from other parts of the former Yugoslavia, a wrecked economy and Serbia's status as an international pariah to show for his efforts. If Kosovo goes, so will Milosevic. Rightly, the international war crimes tribunal at the Hague should be his final stop.

OPINION

Christian Missionary Churches and NGOs

Apropos of the news item published in the front page of your esteemed daily on March 4, 1998 under the heading "Home Ministry asks NGO Bureau: Enact law to check religious conversion by voluntary bodies", I feel obligated to react as an individual as under:

**Historical background:** Historically speaking, different wars, conquerors came to this part of the world in various times and established their rules. Each and every ruler forced/impressed on their subjects to accept the ruler's own social, spiritual, cultural, linguistic mores.

The area came under Buddhist influence in the 3rd century BC, remaining so until the 12th century AD, when Hindus achieved dominance. In the 13th and 14th centuries Muslim Turks and Afghans ruled Bengal. Finally, the Moghul empire united the entire subcontinent, including Bengal, in the 16th century. The British East India Company established the first European settlement in Bengal in 1633. In 1756 the French encouraged the Nawab of Bengal to drive out the British. The East India Company mounted counter-attack in 1757 and defeated the French and the Bengalis at the Battle of Plassey.

Thus the process of conversion is prevalent in this area for a long time. Some were converted by swords, some by charity, some switched to new religion to escape the inherent social, political injustices common in their parent community and for many other reasons. So, for conversion, we cannot raise our fingers just to a particular community only. If it is a crime, we all have already committed it. If it is not and the free will of the individuals are to be respected, accusing a particular community is equivalent to prevarication.

**Government's attitude:** The letter from the Home Ministry dated October 22, 1997 along with a 2-page summary report on the matter, blaming NGOs and Christian Missionary Churches for conversion and other matters without quoting any source renders it questionable and drives one to read between the lines. During erstwhile East Pakistan, I recollect that some time in sixties, there was a secret circulation to all government and non-government offices, instructing not to

recruit the minority people for vital and higher posts. The similar move during the rule of Awami League being believed to be a secular party is definitely shocking to the minority communities.

If somebody is doing something wrong, in this era of democracy, accountability, transparency and free press, the government should have come up with authentic statistical data, facts and figures and the wrong-doers should have been specified avoiding imaginary numbers and false accusations. This secret move clearly gives hints of an attempt to a bad taste to falsely implicate the NGOs and the Christian Missionary Churches.

Government by nature secular should heed the fact that the minorities in this country are discriminated against regularly. One should not forget that the Christians also took active part in the liberation war, even some priests, teachers and youths were brutally killed by the Pakistani occupation forces for supporting the MuktiBahini (freedom fighters). However, the past experiences have taught the minorities to be submissive and agreeing to even the unjust demands of the majority or to flee away. In such situation, the audacity to annoy the majority on the part of the minority community is out of question.

**Christian missionaries:** Christian missionaries are widely known for their charity activities. Mentionably, educational institutions, Mission hospitals, Leprosy hospitals, Charity of Mother Teresa etc. are the forerunners and vivid examples of the Christian spirit of rendering services and dedication to the poor helpless people.

Referring to NGOs, it should be appreciated that hundreds of NGOs receive donations/funds from Christian countries whereas 99 per cent of the heads of NGOs and more than 98 per cent employees are from the majority community. Again, who are the beneficiaries of the programmes of the NGOs? The beneficiaries themselves stand as living evidences.

**Population:** Bangladesh is a Muslim dominated country with 122 million people comprising approximately 86.5 per cent Muslims, 12 per cent Hindus, 0.8 per cent Buddhists, 0.3

per cent Christians and others 0.4 per cent as per statistical report. In 1975, the religious mix of the population of the country was Muslims 80 per cent, Hindus 18 per cent and others 2 per cent (vide The People's Almanac by David Wallacechinsky and Irving Wallace published in 1975).

From above, one can easily read trends. The majority should not worry because the minorities are microscopic in comparison to the majority and they are declining in percentage.

If the government could control polygamy instead of planning to coerce the Christians to follow two-children family strictly, that alone will have tremendous impact on the population control because in terms of population, Christians are still insignificant in numbers though their contribution towards the nation building is remarkably significant.

**Rights and liberties of individuals:** While contemplating and taking steps to enact law meant to control conversion, the government should honour rights and liberties of individuals without any bias/discrimination towards any particular community. The letter from the Home Ministry itself questions the solemnity of the purpose of such exercise.

Minorities in third world countries commonly suffer from social and economic insecurities and injustices. The government should not take steps to further aggravate the situation. Though all the successive governments of the country have so far claimed to have maintained religious harmony, the free and in-depth investigation may not support the claim.

**Conclusion:** The Christians in particular and all people of liberal hearts and sensible minds in general must have already read between the lines. When the government has been secretly moving against a microscopic minority community, the community will have to rethink about the secularism that is often talked about by the government.

However, this might have been an act of a very small vested group. In that case, the government should take appropriate measures to clear its stand on the matter.

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To the Editor...

"BUET incident ..."

Sir, This refers to the contradictory news 'BUET incident: 65 teachers in 'contradict report' published in the DS on Saturday March 21, 1998.

Incidentally we were present at the site where students were conducting a sit-in strike, contrary to what the 65 teachers contended; we witnessed provocative behaviour on part of some members of Engineering Faculty. Furthermore, security guards manhandled the striking students in presence of the teachers. It was also alarming to observe that in such a crowded situation BUET teachers decided to use hazardous blow-torch forcibly.

We are appalled to learn that the 65 teachers who were definitely not present at the site, with us can endorse such a fabricated statement of the incident! Unfortunately, these 65 teachers are rather blindly supporting and justifying misdoings of some of their colleagues but in doing so they

have jeopardised their credibility as well as of the BUET teaching community, especially those who have sensibly refrained from it.

Bikash Saud Ansary  
Uttara, Dhaka  
Md Rejaul Karim  
Sukrabad Dhaka  
Jalal Ahmed  
Dhanmondi, Dhaka

This is why he resigned!

Sir, A resigning teacher's letter in The Daily Star on 22.3.98 ("This is why we resign...") nicely stated the basics of a teacher's teachings to students about "morality", "justice", etc. Does it also include instigating students against their own teachers, blackmailing them not to register for classes, posting against teachers, involving outsiders by feeding them lies, blatantly lying to the same students about what was agreed

A Concerned Teacher of BUET and a Guardian