

Light at the End of the Tunnel

Is it too much to say that a flicker of light can be seen at the end of the tunnel? Atal Behari Vajpayee's decision to be on board the first bus to Lahore from Delhi has opened up a window of hope, peace and friendship between India and Pakistan in particular and other countries of South Asia in general. We praise the political acumen of Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for extending invitation to his Indian counterpart to visit that country and at the same breath salute the sagacity and farsightedness reciprocated by the veteran Indian leader by accepting the invitation. The Pakistan Prime Minister has also indicated his eagerness to accompany Vajpayee in his return journey to Delhi. He has also expressed the hope that half the existing problems between these two neighbours that have soured their relation and gave birth to mutual mistrust and acrimony can be solved during the bus ride.

This is an extraordinary stand taken by both the leaders which will have far-reaching effects on the entire gamut of politics in the subcontinent including countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The present cricket series between India and Pakistan, the visit of US Under Secretary Strobe Talbott to the two capitals and his talks with the two leaders, the concept of direct contacts between the peoples of the two countries — all these may have profound influence on the leaders of these two warring neighbours. And we sincerely believe these gestures from them will not turn out to be mere political gimmicks. We strongly believe that unless the big ones of the subcontinent cool down to normal relations, remove mutual suspicion and work for the improvement of standard of living, one fifth of the world's population shall remain in the backwaters of an ever prospering world dominated by advanced and peaceful nations.

We feel tremendously encouraged by Nawaz Sharif's proposal for bipartisan talks on every problem between these two countries including nuclear devices and a positive response from the Indian government. It is quite logical that if every problem including the oldest one — Kashmir — can be on agenda of mutual discussion why can't be other problems? However our experience shows this has not been the case in the past. But we look forward with high hopes to a safer and brighter future for the millions in the subcontinent. We wish both leaders good luck and godspeed.

The Criminal Hierarchy

A Bangla daily citing police sources reported last week that there are 5,000 gunslingers in Dhaka city on the loose. These anti-people elements are engaged in the grimmest of crimes against humanity one can imagine: muggings through armed robbery to homicidal land-grabbing. Transport-sector operators and workers, home developers and even lower middle-class grocers are subject to their assault in terms of toll collection at gunpoint. Not so unexpectedly, these criminals are categorised into A, B and C Teams in a hierarchical order. And each team enjoys the blessing of a "leader" who is either on bail or giving orders from behind bars. More deplorable is the fact that even these leaders have bosses wearing masks of 'social elite', 'politician', etc., who are "Godfathers" the criminals and their activities. The police are helpless because these Godfathers — reportedly numbering forty — are powerful and influential. Allegedly law enforcers also have "their" slice of the cake.

Now, earning money by unjust means is not new in this country, but the present phenomenon of criminalisation is certainly a subject of anxiety and fear. Slowly but surely, these thugs are gaining in social status which — if left to what they are involved in — ultimately will take them to higher social elevations — similar to what the Godfathers have reached.

The only solution to this wholesale criminalisation is that the law keepers and enforcers shake off their inclination for "more money" and break out of this tangle of "inhuman bondage" and address the issue with professional honesty. No doubt they know the criminals and their ways like the thumb of their hand and all they need to do is to muster strength for an appropriate action.

Sundarbans of the World

Sundarbans is no longer exclusively ours. The declaration of the World Heritage Committee, a brain-child of the UNESCO, at its 21st convention on December 6 last year makes the world's biggest surviving mangrove forest the heritage of mankind. The recognition is a matter of great national pride for us and, at the same time, entails great responsibility for us as a nation. We are made custodians of a site that belongs to the human race. Elevation to a world heritage site will give the forest the international exposure it needs and certainly deserves, and global efforts, in the form of funds and expertise, to protect its flora and fauna will follow as logical consequences. Also, it will put us under the global microscope. All eyes will be on us to judge our integrity and, of course, initiatives to protect this patch of plenty.

We, as a nation, have hardly any achievement that might manifest environment consciousness of any degree. On the contrary, we have allowed activities over the years that are actually detrimental to the environment. Indiscriminate deforestation, air pollution, dumping toxic waste into water etc., the list grows everyday. Sundarbans has not been spared of these acts of self-destruction. In the process Royal Bengal Tiger has become an endangered species and so have many others. In our frenzied fight for survival, we have actually decimated our chances of healthy living.

Recognition of Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site should work as an eye-opener for us. The time has come to realise and reassess our responsibilities to the eco-system. The government mechanism, at the central and local levels, should — and, we earnestly hope it would — live up to the responsibility entrusted upon us by the mankind.

D OREEN Burford is standing in a grocer's shop in West London, paying for a couple of loaves of bread and some milk. In pounds.

"I'm not interested in all this Euro business," she says, dismissively. "They can do what they like. It's got nothing to do with us."

A quick straw poll of other customers results in widespread agreement. "I have no idea what it's all about," says Martin Brooke, an estate agent. "I mean, there's still francs and marks and the rest. So where does the Euro, or whatever they call it, come in?"

Britain's Europhobic reputation, it seems, is well-founded. Recent polls have suggested that as many as three in five either dislike the Euro, mistrust it or simply don't understand it. And 35 per cent simply want nothing to do with it. Ever.

With seven of Britain's national newspapers — and by far the biggest-selling ones, too — rabidly opposed to the Euro, this may come as little surprise. Few days have passed in recent years without a broadside — often misleading — about how "sovereignty" could be eroded as a European superstate creeps out from behind the Euro's shadow, and how our beloved pound must be protected to the death.

As for the politicians... well, that's a different story. The sad saga of how the right-wing Conservative Party's 18-year rule founded as it split itself apart over Europe is treated by today's Labour government as a cautionary tale. The powerful newspaper owners, in the shape of (Australian-American) Rupert Murdoch and (Canadian) Conrad Black, will turn on anyone backing Europe, the Euro or anything remotely similar, runs the theory. So, active support is ruled out. Cau-

tionally, at a BBC interview in London, Ghaffar Chowdhury, the Bangladeshi critic and analyst acknowledged the global trend, at the close of the century, of peoples' minds turning towards religion. The religious movement is working quietly or with more noise and fanfare, in different societies. These groups are the religious entrepreneurs of the back-to-the-religion movement. We encourage entrepreneurship in other fields; why we face this one?

There is nothing wrong in seeking or re-seeking one's divine origin; but the style of the campaign matters, in so far as how it affects the rest of the society (the movement in modern Turkey is an instance). What is this global "terrorism" as defined by the West? Who comprise the West or the First World?

What is happening, or not happening, in Bangladesh, cannot be isolated local incidents for localised judgement, punishment and reward. Therefore the depth and breath of the growing phenomenon have to be studied by scholars and experts in different professions (as social thinking patterns are affected in all the sectors of daily life; for example, the institutionalisation of corrupt practices), and the general public guided into disciplined reactions.

Since religion is a matter mainly of faith, ruled by the "heart", the regulatory "brain-power" (logic and rationality) have to be applied judiciously,

As Europe coalesces around a single currency, Britain — along with Denmark, Greece and Sweden — sits on the sidelines. Gemini News Service examines the mood of the British as the monetary world changes around them.

Jeremy Scott-Joyst writes from London

tious engagement — with the possibility of actually joining a single currency lost in the mists of time, for public consumption at least — is the only way to go.

But hold on a minute. This is New Britain, Cool Britannia, is it not? Cosmopolitan, open to the world the globe's number one cultural crossroads? Surely the residents of such a country, whose capital city is Europe's most advanced melting pot of

nationalities and ethnicities, can cope with the idea of being a little closer to Europe?

Certainly, Europe as a place holds few secrets these days to the average Briton. Foreign holidays, foreign TV, foreign food, all are commonplace. And in artistic and cultural terms, the integration is well advanced.

"Sure, there are still national stereotypes," says Martin Petersen, a Danish DJ who is

one of the tens of thousands of foreign nationals who have put down roots in London's music, fashion, arts and cultural scene. "But on the whole people don't see what divides us any more, in personal terms."

So why the disaffection, even loathing, of the idea of merging the pound into the Euro? There are all the old reasons. The British, an island people, are naturally xenophobic, say some; although that sometimes translates into English as "bearing a proud heritage". They speak no foreign languages, so they can't understand how others think, say others. If they had to merge the pound with anything, it would be the dollar, say the really cynical.

But in truth, it all comes down, unsurprisingly, to money and economics. Not real money, the perception of money.

All nations are sentimental about their currency. The French love the franc. For Germans, the mark has been the bulwark of financial stability for half a century. But for we British the pound sterling is special. Even the name sounds majestic. It confirms our history as a force to be reckoned with. After all, was not the pound once the strongest currency in the world? For those still fed on a diet of past glories, The pound is the symbol of Great Power: our true, underlying status, whatever reality may be.

And it's still strength we seem to crave. A strong pound rescues governments; a weak pound destroys them. A strong pound means more to spend

when we go — to Europe — on holiday. A weak pound means the streets full of Americans and other foreigners, waving cameras and treating the whole country as a theme park.

The problem is that out of any twenty people you talk to, nineteen of them won't have the faintest idea what a strong pound actually means in practice — or, indeed, what sovereignty means in practice either.

On the one hand, the drive of a strong pound has completed the declination of British manufacturing industry, aided and abetted by unnecessary recessions. It has overpriced our exports and boosted our imports, at just the time that consumer spending rode a credit boom.

On the other, despite the fact that the last Conservative government's line was that a single currency would rob Britain of its control over its own affairs, the truth is that they signed that control away years ago, when a succession of treaties in the 80s gave laws made by the European Union primacy over conflicting ones made at home.

In other words, the opposition is largely emotional, sustained by comfortable tradition and the use of borderline-xenophobic imagery in popular culture, the press, and by some politicians.

It's no coincidence that those most in favour of the Euro are those with the most reason to be hard-headed about money. Employers and unions — in the shape of Adair Turner, chairman of the Confederation of British Industry, and Trades Union Congress chief John

Monks — speak with one voice when they back the Euro, and the pound's entry to it, at the earliest opportunity, to the hilt. And the City of London, the financial powerhouse of Britain, loves it.

That isn't to say that opposition is not strong, not deep-rooted. It is, partly because successive governments have spent 30 years trying to avoid explaining European politics to voters, preferring to talk in terms of "concessions" wrung from "them" in Brussels for "us" at home. Acknowledgment of EU membership has been grudging at best and violently confrontational at the usual worst. And even were Prime Minister Tony Blair and his government to start supporting the Euro, Britain won't join the currency before the next election in 2001 or 2002.

But over the three years until Europe gives up its currencies, denominations of the Euro as they now officially are, in favour of common notes and coins, British people, wandering the length and breadth of the continent on business or vacation, will have a long time to get accustomed to the dead — as do those using it every day in the 11 countries involved. If it works — which seems likely — acceptance may come gradually, invisibly. The Euro will seep into our lives and, twenty years from now, we may wonder why it seemed such a strange idea in the first place.

After all, twenty years ago, the thought of the British eating "continental" food in preference to their own, drinking wine from the world over instead of beer, and habitually holidaying anywhere with a patch of sand and a hot sun, would have seemed ridiculous. Times change. And we change with them, whether we intend to or not.

The author is the editor of Gemini News Service.

Almost a single currency



The Global Shift Towards Intimations of Religious Awareness

Man the created, cannot forsake the invisible attachment to divinity or nature. From time to time the wayward comes back to the fold, urged by the divinity embedded in human nature and make-up. The cycles must follow the courses within a narrow band of human life.

by Alif Zabir

as behaviour patterns are involved, which affect motivation (one person's sustenance is another's poison) and no one likes to have his principles of life shaken up violently by other groups who 'believe' in something else.

The problems are not in the branches or the leaves (effects), but deep inside the roots of the newly-evolving structures (cause). The solution is not through confrontation or violence, but understanding (with philosophical detachment), and tolerance based on mutual agreement, between different groups of human beings of the same society within a nation, and the international link of common objectives. The differences in opinions are not a new invention or discovery, and will continue to haunt civilisations, the way a man's shadow follows him everywhere.

What is happening, or not happening, in Bangladesh, cannot be isolated local incidents for localised judgement, punishment and reward. Therefore the depth and breath of the growing phenomenon have to be studied by scholars and experts in different professions (as social thinking patterns are affected in all the sectors of daily life; for example, the institutionalisation of corrupt practices), and the general public guided into disciplined reactions.

The locations of the trouble spots across the globe is not the point at issue, as the geographical areas affected in all the continents are familiar to the newspaper readers. The new trend towards religion will not go away just by wishing or

whipping. One and all have to live with the problem or the changes, with minimum of disharmony, otherwise societies cannot settle down to updated patterns and trends.

The changing trends in the society have to be faced and accommodated with goodwill, benevolence, generosity, compromise and tolerance, because basically it is a game among human beings, and not among two or more different types of incompatible creatures. The same communities are involved, not extra-terrestrials from outer space. Man's inhumanity to man in a recurrent complaint in history. Now we are faced with new trends or cycles. Cycles cannot be stemmed, because it is a part of creation.

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ONE of the basic causes of such reactionary movements is to balance the existing excesses in some areas of life or thinking. Mathematically, the curve swings or changing its course and direction, going up or down, regardless of the gradient. It is the simple harmonic motion (HRM) of life. Negative feedback

is a correction device in any system, and the same principle can be applied to human life and philosophy, attitude, or outlook.

There are generation changes due to many factors. Some of these are new technologies, discoveries and inventions, and others are due to natural changes or calamities (the history of the lost continents). There is always a tendency to seek balance towards stability, to correct the excesses or overdoes, whether through education and knowledge, or physical movements and campaigns.

One example or area which could be studied with interest is the rise of materialism today and its cumulative effects and impacts in life and living, and the resulting reactions in individuals, societies, and nations. Hedonism and consumerism have gripped the imagination, thrusting conscience out of focus. The established values of life cannot be devalued without paying the price.

Discarding has become a lost art. How the poor live is unknown to generations in the affluent countries. Today the communication gaps have been reducing fast, and the awareness levels (of exploitation, for example) have gone up. Living in isolated grandeur is no longer possible (nor desirable). Therefore the mode or style of the reactions have also changed. Why we behave the way we do (at any point in time)?

Secularism is more preached than practised; and it is practised tactfully, with side-tracks will cover up with the gift of the gab and subtle propaganda techniques of diversion and putting the ball in the other's court (the ethnic genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo, with the secret objective of denying any independent Muslim state in Europe — a deep genetic reaction to several centuries of Ottoman rule). Hidden racism is another example.

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OPINION

The Political Phases

by Abul M Ahmad

The political cycles in Bangladesh are following a pattern of 4: 16 (9, 7); 4: 4: years. The post-Eid '99 conflagration in politics may be different from that of the period 1994-95 (180 hartals), in that it may last for a much shorter period, due to the experience gained and the lessons learnt by the parties, players and the citizens (who are also voters).

Besides the energy available for momentum has decreased, the mass remaining more or less the same. Also, the effect and the damaging power of lakhs of unlicensed arms in the wrong hands should not be ignored. It is a reality we all have to face, as the clandestine smuggling of arms into the country is increasing, as reported in the press — for mysterious reasons.

The people are suffering from political fatigue; therefore many lingering issues would have to be solved or disposed off by the time the new picture emerges. For example, the hartal of violence and intimidation, the Bangladeshi or Bengali issue, the stand on secularism (why Islamic socialism is not enough if practised correctly); how far to go 'Islamic' and where to draw the line. The CHT issue, institutionalised corruption, toll collection and rent seeking, indiscipline of the labour and service groups, campus politics are also pending issues (the SOEs may also be included).

Now communal thinking is raising its ugly head in Pakistan (Karachi, Shia-Sunni), India (cricket tour) and Bangladesh (the attack on poet Shamshur Rahman). This should not become a new pattern — although history has the nasty habit of repeating itself at odd moments.

The long-term effects of local disputes have to be analysed carefully, in national interest. We sermonise well, but do not follow our own advice. The internal cementing force is weak, discouraging consensus on common issues. Divided we stand, united we fall. Time and tide wait for none, but perhaps not in sonar Bangla.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts.