

Dhaka-Calcutta Bus Service Engenders a New Beginning

by A H Jaffor Ullah

THE bus from Calcutta appropriately named the "Souhardya," finally rolled into Osmany Memorial Hall compound in the evening of June 19, 1999. This marks a new beginning in the Indo-Bangla bilateral relationship. We hope the common people of both Bangladesh and India would be benefited by the bus service.

This inauguration of the bus service between the capital of Bangladesh and the main city of West Bengal, Calcutta, was truly a media event because the Prime Ministers of both the countries and the Chief Minister of West Bengal were there to greet the bus.

This highly publicized event received wide media coverage; consequently, the Internet was abuzz with reports coming from four corners of both India and Bangladesh. This inaugural event gave an ample opportunity for Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to acknowledge one more time the contribution India made in 1971 to free Bangladesh from the clutch of an occupation army.

The inaugural ceremony did not go without a hitch. The Indian government did not include notable West Bengal literary giant Mr. Sunil Gangopadhyaya in its delegation, for reason unexplained. If restoration of cultural flow between two Bengalis, which was damaged during 1965 war between Pakistan and India, was indeed one of the prime reasons for opening the bus link, then, exclusion of Mr. Sunil Gangopadhyaya from the delegation was a monumental mistake.

The other sore spot in festive Dhaka was the presence of a group waving black flags to renounce the presence of Indian Prime Minister in Bangladesh soil. This group and others like them had long harboured the view that the present administration of Bangladesh is too cozy with Indian administration, and they had equated this wrongly with the notion that the sovereignty of Bangladesh had been compromised severely. The religious party, the Jamaat, is at the forefront of this anti-Indian propaganda. Ironically, this is the same party who opposed the creation of an independent nation-state, the Bangladesh in 1971.

The largest opposition party in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) did not join the fringe parties to denounce the bus link between Dhaka and Calcutta. If I recall correctly, Begum Khaleda Zia, the leader of BNP was very much opposed to the idea of this bus service as late as January this year. Good judgment had prevailed and Khaleda Zia decided to maintain mum about the whole thing.

It is to be hoped that this bus service should continue for a long time to come and the bilateral agreement that allowed this bus link to be established will not be revoked if a new party is elected to run Bangladesh in the next election. The political philosophy of any particular party in Bangladesh, in my judgment, should not dictate the bilateral issues between Bangladesh and her neighbours.

Now that a viable bus service is in place between Dhaka and Calcutta with blessings from both the governments, the common people will reap the benefit. In the last twenty-eight years of existence, Bangladesh's sovereignty was never before in jeopardy and nor will it be in the future. The Dhaka-Calcutta bus service is not the 'wolf in sheep's skin,' as some opponents would lead us to believe. Instead, they should join others to build a civil society in Bangladesh that we need desperately now and through the coming millennium.

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Tony Blair's 'Gamble' on Scotland Is Britain's Glass 'Half Full', or 'Half Empty'?

by AMM Shahabuddin

Providing Scotland with a parliament of its own may be a temporary 'lullaby' to put the 'new baby back to bed', but ultimately it can bounce back to take up its position on the world map. It's a case of a 'dormant,' and not a dead, volcano.

And to contain that 'storm', Britain spread an indigenous 'safety-valve' in the shape of a new parliament in Scotland to let the steam, that has been building up for about 300 years, out.

Things are Not What They Seem

Tony Blair has expressed his great satisfaction about the results of the recent elections to the new Scottish Parliament. (And what will this Parliament deal with? It will have the power to deal with issues like education, health, law and order, and the right to raise taxes, leaving foreign affairs, defence, economy, energy and road transport etc. with the parliament in London. Does it not sound like a provincial autonomy? Where a genuine and due share is not forthcoming, throwing a few morsels will lead to disaster.) Yes, the election results show that the Labour Party has won some 57 seats, out of a total of 129 in the parliament, while the secessionist party, the SNP got 37, with the remaining seats going to other parties, including the Conservative Party which was literally 'buried' in Scotland during the 1997 elections when Labour Party swept to power. But appearances are often deceptive.

If an analysis of the above election results is done with reference to the seats obtained by major parties, compared with their 'performance' in 1997, it would definitely serve as a pointer showing which way the Scottish wind is blowing. In the 1997 elections, Blair's Labour Party grabbed all the seats from Scotland, defeating its closest rival the Conservative Party. But in the recent

Parliament elections, Labour has not even been able to capture 50 per cent of the total 129 seats, while its close rival the newly emerged pro-independence party, the SNP, snatched some 37 seats away from the Labour. And surprisingly, the 'born again' Conservative Party also took more than a dozen seats. The remaining seats were divided among some minor parties, including the Liberal Democrats. So the landslide victory achieved by Labour earlier was totally smashed, and the 'brave face' that Blair tries to put up before the people belies the seriousness of the matter. So what slipped out of Labour's hands were netted by the 'new-born' SNP and the 're-born' Conservative Party.

Coming Events: Shadows Cast

'Coming events always cast their shadows before', so goes the saying. And the upset caused by the SNP clearly indicates the shape of things to come to Scotland in due course. That is what Salmond, the SNP leader, has said, in a post-election statement that SNP had gained support across Scotland at the expense of the Labour Party. The only party that gained in this election was the SNP. 'Mr. Salmond had also vowed to continue pressing for independence from the platform of the new parliament.' So it would be living in a fool's paradise to dismiss outright the recent success of the SNP as a mere 'passing show'. No, it has already struck its roots in the minds of a very large section of the Scottish people. A dormant volcano may start spitting fire once it is fully fermented.

It must be remembered that one swallow does not make a

summer? Hence there should not be any false complacency on the part of the Blair Government to still say that the 'glass is half full'. They should also realise that their 'glass is also half empty'. It then makes a lot of difference. Just as it shows your strength, it also depicts your lack of strength or weakness. Better to call a spade, a spade, than to pretend otherwise.

'Genie' has Not been Bottled

Wartime British Prime Minister Winston Churchill of the Conservative Party, once said he wouldn't like to 'preside over the liquidation of the British Empire.' That was indeed, a worthy statement from a worthy, die-hard colonial power representative. And, he was reluctant to 'off-load' 'whiteman's burden.' So the 'mantle was taken over by the Labour Party which came to power by defeating the conservatives in the first post-war general elections held in the UK. So the Labour Prime Minister Atlee had to do the 'dirty job'. The present Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair may not either like to 'preside over the 'secession' of Scotland from the UK. Perhaps he won't be in power when the fateful time comes for the 'tragic operations'. But one thing is certain, Blair's name will go down in history as a 'pioneer of the 'liquidation' process that he set in by offering the Scottish people their own Parliament, although with limited powers, but which is definitely a big step in the right direction for the Scots towards achieving independence. So it would be day-dreaming to say that the 'genie' of Scottish independence has

been 'bottled' forever by Blair by granting the Scottish people a forum of their own to give vent to their feelings. It is difficult to keep a tiger 'lamed' once it has tasted blood. History is replete with such instances of the same nature of the Scottish drama.

England's Difficulty: Whose Opportunity?

As they say, 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity'. Of course, Ireland, which was kept within the UK for centuries against the wishes of its people, broke away from the British bondage at the first 'opportunity' which it exploited during the First World War and Britain granted it independence in 1922. It now adorns the world map as the Republic of Ireland, thanks to the tireless struggle carried on by the Sinn Fein guerrillas. It is true that the Irish people had to be satisfied with only the 'bare bones' of their land, mostly dominated by Roman Catholics, sacrificing a quarter in the north, known as Northern Ireland, populated mostly by Protestants, which still maintains its link with the Westminster parliament, with allegiance to the British Crown. But the Sinn Fein, with its armed cadres in the IRA, is still at loggerheads with the Unionists of Northern Ireland over the issue of the merger with the Irish Republic. The smoke and fire game is not over yet.

So, just as Ireland took full advantage of UK's difficulty because of the First World War, and made full utilization of the 'opportunity' that knocked at its door, to free the country from British domination, so would Scotland most likely rise to free itself from centuries-old British domination at the first 'opportunity' that comes its

way. And the establishment of the Scottish Parliament will definitely be the first 'opportunity' for Scotland to open its 'innings' (to borrow a cricket term). The first taste of democratic rights in the shape of their own parliament will undoubtedly boost their national aspirations to achieve full freedom from a colonial power, the UK, to which it was tethered for centuries like a leash-pin.

Scotland in World Cup Cricket: A New Dimension

Incidentally, I am tempted to bring in the question of Scotland's participation for the first time in the on-going World Cup Cricket championship in England. Apparently, it may be a simple co-incidence with the inauguration of the first Parliament of Scotland. But undoubtedly, it brings a deeper sense of self-respect as a new nation in the making, with its own socio-cultural identity. Scotland is still a part of the United Kingdom. A national team, under the name of England, is participating in the World Cup '99, of which England is the host country. And other participating countries are all independent nations, except Scotland. Is this not a sign of the beginning of the end? Scotland, at this stage, may be considered as a 'minor' but it would be no wonder if it participates in the near future in the World Cup Cricket as a full-fledged independent nation, the process of formation of which has already begun. Providing Scotland with a parliament of its own may be a temporary 'lullaby' to put the 'new baby back to bed', but ultimately it can bounce back to take up its position on the world map. It's a case of a 'dormant,' and not a dead, volcano. Hence, eruption is inevitable. The last bugle by the Scottish Band is now only a matter of time.

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BRAC's Non-Formal Education Programme and the 53 Competencies

by Dr Sanat K Ghosh

NFPE programme is one of the best educational programmes, which not only is disseminating education among the deprived rural community, but also covering the government-specified terminal competencies ... It may be a model for other developing countries.

THE government of Bangladesh has identified 53 terminal competencies for the Formal Primary Education (FPE) cycle, the aim being that the children will have achieved those competencies after completing their primary education.

Besides the government itself, the responsibility of providing primary education to the children of Bangladesh is also shared by the private sector and the NGOs. BRAC, like several other NGOs, is operating a Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) Programme. Starting with 22 experimental schools in 1985, the programme has scaled to approximately 35,000 schools till date. BRAC's target group includes those children who never got an opportunity to attend school, and those who dropped out from formal schools due to poverty, gender discrimination, and a variety of other reasons. Consequently, BRAC is performing a commendable job in complementing the government's primary education programme.

BRAC values primary education not only because it is a fundamental human right but also because it is believed to be an effective development strategy. BRAC has been running two models of schools, one for 8-10 age group, the second one for older children of 11-14 age group (Basic Education for Older Children), with particular emphasis on female children. Currently, BRAC's NFPE has scaled its phase III.

Some of the salient features

of this phase are the expansion of curriculum in all NFPE schools to cover the current compulsory five-year formal primary school cycle in four years and the introduction of a decentralized quality control system supported by the creation of an education unit to provide required expertise to develop quality materials. Thus, one of the main objectives of NFPE programme is mainstreaming with formal education.

Initially the aims and objectives of NFPE programme were quite different from the aims and objectives framed by the government. But at present, with the demands of the changing academic scenario of the country, the programme is going to match the formal level of upper primary education and it is expected that graduates of this programme will be admitted in the secondary level at grade-six. In this context, a pertinent question may be raised: how far the existing NFPE programme is fulfilling the specified terminal competencies of the primary education cycle identified by the government? On the other hand, the government may also raise the same question particularly in respect of admission of the BRAC graduates in different secondary schools of the country.

This study project was undertaken and conducted in the month of April this year, and is an appraisal of the materials used by the BRAC NFPE programme in respect to the terminal

competencies identified by the government. The three-year curriculum and related materials were reviewed and analysed in order to determine how well these were covering the specified terminal competencies. Three types of materials were examined:

i) Text Materials, which included all the textbooks and supplementary story books developed by BRAC for the students up to grade-three.

ii) Curriculum Transaction Materials, including all the guidebooks and training modules developed by BRAC for the teachers, supervisors and master trainers.

iii) Evaluation Materials, consisting of NFPE Achievement Test (NAT) as well as the recorded evaluation system of the schools.

The term 'competency' has a variety of meanings like capability, efficiency, proficiency and so forth. In education, it is used in a different context. Competencies are specified in terms of educational objectives in one hand and learning needs of a particular level of education on the other. There are various components of any educational programme, viz curriculum, contents, teaching, evaluation and also the teacher training and supervision, each

of which is related with the terminal competencies. Therefore, studies on the achievement of terminal competencies at primary education level are very much desirable particularly with the changing educational scenario of the country.

Another important issue related with the concept of competency is the learning needs of the students. According to Bloom's taxonomy learning outputs can broadly be divided into three domains:

a) Psycho-Motor (physical activities, habits, skills and performance etc.); b) Cognitive (knowledge and thinking); and c) Affective (belief, faith, outlook, attitude and interest etc).

These domains are separate but connected, and can be differentiated in terms of behavioural expressions. In our common practices we emphasize much on the areas of knowledge and thinking i.e. cognitive domain of learning. Actually this area influences both the psycho-motor and the affective domains of learning. Psycho-motor domain is also emphasized giving importance to learning different types of physical activities, habit formation skill development, performance and so forth. This domain also directly or indirectly influences the cognitive

domain. Learning in affective domain is the product of long-term learning practices. It includes belief, faith, outlook, attitude, interest and so forth. Therefore, the terminal competencies may be clarified on the basis of learning needs of the learners at primary level.

Among the specified fifty-three terminal competencies, nineteen were found to be of psycho-motor type, 24 were of cognitive, and 10 were of affective type. These were coded accordingly, and a two-way content analysis was done of the above-mentioned three types of materials by the three kinds of competencies. The coverage was qualified in terms of well-covered, fairly-covered, and not-covered competencies.

As mentioned above, almost hundred per cent emphases are generally given in achieving the cognitive competencies, that is the acquisition of knowledge, at any level of education. Primary education is no exception in spite of the specified types of terminal competencies. But as far as BRAC's NFPE programme is concerned, the findings reveal that the three-year programme of BRAC's NFPE is not only dealing with cognitive competencies with much coverage of but also covering other two types of competencies fairly

well. The overall three-year NFPE programme has fairly covered almost all terminal competencies on an average specified for Formal Primary Education (FPE) Programme of the government.

If the findings are broken down in further details, Text Materials and Curriculum Transaction Materials are covering 12 and 18 of the 19 psycho-motor competencies very well. As far as 24 cognitive competencies are concerned, Text Materials are covering 18, and Curriculum Transaction Materials are also covering 18, and Evaluation Materials are covering 16 very well. Well coverage of 10 Affective competencies were also evident by Text Materials and Curriculum Transaction Materials covering four and five respectively.

The Text and the Curriculum Transaction Materials are playing the most remarkable role in this regard. Text materials developed by BRAC are unique and cover almost all the competencies well. The Curriculum Transaction Materials are multi-dimensional. These are well-structured, detailed, lesson-based, scientific, and also covers almost all the competencies well. As a system, the evaluation programme of NFPE is scientific especially for cognitive

type of competencies. As discussed earlier, it is difficult to evaluate the affective type of competencies particularly at the primary level. Similarly, it is not an easy task to evaluate and keep record of psycho-motor type of competencies. Therefore, there is a scope to develop some innovative techniques of evaluation, which can cover all types of competencies.

The study also compared the detailed subject-based learning objectives between the five-year Formal Primary Education (FPE) cycle at the end of grade three and three-year NFPE programme of BRAC. The comparison indicated that, out of total 124 learning objectives in different subjects, 119 learning objectives were found to be covered by the NFPE programme. But the most significant point to be noted here is that the NFPE programme is covering approximately 60 additional learning objectives, which are not generally covered in FPE programme.

As a result of the evaluation of the curriculum, observation of the teaching-learning processes of quite a few schools and training sessions, and interaction with all levels of BRAC NFPE staff and education researchers, it may be concluded in the end that BRAC people are devoting devotedly to make the NFPE programme a success by fulfilling their respective assignments. Each one of them was found to be very much aware about the goal of the NFPE programme.

A decentralized mechanism

of receiving constant feedback from every phase of activity and respective monitoring, reviewing and modifying systems is the main springs of the whole programme. Students learn with pleasure through playful methods, and co-curricular activities are highly encouraged. Emphasis is given on meaningful learning rather than rote memorization. The training programmes are detailed, well-structured and learning objective-based.

The whole NFPE programme was found unique in its character particularly in terms of material development and curriculum transaction. Although the NFPE teachers of BRAC are not academically high qualified, rigorous and constant training provided by the programme, and the teachers' own motivation and dedication are working behind the schools' continuation and the programme's success.

In conclusion, it may be noted that BRAC's NFPE programme is definitely one of the best educational programmes, which not only is disseminating education among the deprived rural community, but also covering the government-specified terminal competencies very well, particularly the cognitive competencies. It may be a model for the developing countries.

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ME Peace Process: Prospects with New Israeli PM

by A S M Nurunnabi

The mood in the region has drastically altered. The bulk of the population in quite a constant way is wanting to pursue diplomacy if that can heal centuries of ethnic animosity.

THE political landscape of Israel dramatically changed with the massive victory of Ehud Barak as Prime Minister of Israel in its May 17 election, defeating by a wide margin the incumbent Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Barak, a former General of the Army and the most decorated soldier of Israel, was the political heir-apparent of Yitzhak Rabin who signed the peace deal with Yasser Arafat leading to the establishment of the Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with partial withdrawal of the Israeli occupying forces. After Rabin's assassination, Netanyahu, on coming to power, halted the phased withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied Arab territories and put the Middle East peace process and the Israeli-Palestinian accord in jeopardy.

Barak was reported to have said that within one year he would withdraw the Israeli soldiers from South Lebanon and would pursue Rabin's policy of land for peace. Since a durable peace with the Arabs means a total package, Barak has not

only to implement the Oslo Accord but also make agreement with Syria, a key player in the region.

Yasser Arafat frankly expressed optimism that Barak would push the peace process forward. However, there is no illusion that Yasser Arafat may find in Barak a tough negotiator like a tough soldier as he has been.

Barak will quickly find himself under pressure to act on Middle East peace. He made bold campaign promises to resume the orderly handover of land quickly to the Palestinians and to get Israeli soldiers out of South Lebanon — which has become his nation's mini-Vietnam within a year. But Barak's stated preferences may collide with some basic realities on the ground. Syrian President Hafez Assad has repeatedly ruled out any peace agreement between Israel and his vassal government in Beirut without a comprehensive peace settlement that gives him back all of the Golan Heights.

The Clinton administration wants Barak to jump-start talks with Yasser Arafat. The

central issue, a final comprehensive peace agreement that would settle such thorny issues as the future status of Jerusalem and the dozens of Jewish settlements scattered throughout the West Bank.

Now, in the opinion of international observers, it's time for both Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat to understand each other and above all, each other's problems. There are, however, some irreconcilable elements, which are feared, may hinder progress in negotiations on Middle East. Barak was known to have similar views as those of Netanyahu on some key issues. For example, on the status of Jerusalem, it was felt by Israel that it should remain the undivided capital of Israel and there would not be return of all the lands captured by Israel in the 1967 war. The dream of the Palestinian people to make the eastern part of Jerusalem the capital of their independent

state may not be agreed to by Barak. However, Barak vowed to continue negotiations on a final settlement with the Palestinians and any final settlement would be put to a referendum.

Although Barak won the election with a huge majority, he is badly affected by a splintered parliament; his Labour-led alliance did not do well in parliament. His alliance won only 27 seats, a sharp drop from 34 seats held by Labour in the last parliament. Furthermore, the ultra-orthodox party of poor Middle East Jews, Shas Yained 17 seats, up from a previous 10. The success of Shas demonstrated that the voters were given a confused signal by electing more seats for the ultra-orthodox party. It was reported that in many parts of Israel, the voters were more interested in the internal issues of the country such as unemployment, economic down-turn, dis-

visive character of the Israeli community and the rise of orthodoxy. Peace with the Palestinian people was hardly an issue with them.

Of necessity, Barak has to form a coalition government as the seats are splintered among 31 parties, from extreme left to extreme right and from secular to ultra orthodox as a result in Knesset, Barak may have the support of 5 members in a 120-member House. Indications are still lacking as to the political lines on the basis of which government is to be formed. After the victory, Barak stressed the need for unity. If he is to keep unity, he will not be able to ignore the Shas and other religious parties which may not feel comfortable if the programme of dismantling the Jewish settlements encouraged the directed by Netanyahu, is taken up. It is yet to be seen how the present trend of internal politics affects the Middle East

peace process.

For three years, Netanyahu had blocked peace with the Palestinians, sown discord between religious and ethnic factions and overseen an economy in a rut. The question is whether Barak, who must form a coalition government within six weeks, is really the man to get things moving on the right track for peace. The Israelis have given their verdict for a new direction by electing Barak. Observers hope that the Palestinians will be able to play with a new set of Israeli players with success. After all, there is a feeling among many wishing for a stable state of things for the improvement of peace prospects, that any person would appear to be better than Netanyahu who was known for his duplicity and hypocrisy.

The Israeli voting public has cast its clear and decisive vote in favour of smooth continua-

tion of the Middle East peace process and there is hope that Barak can be depended upon to carry on in that spirit not only for phased withdrawal from Palestinian lands, but also from the Israeli-imposed security zone of South Lebanon to make peace with Lebanon, as he already promised in his election agenda.

As regards Syria, Barak said he was ready to resume negotiations with it at the point where his predecessor left off in 1996. The Palestinians meanwhile sent mixed messages about a possible unilateral declaration of statehood in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. A senior aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said statehood might be declared within six months.

Previously, the Palestinians had tacitly accepted an unofficial new target date of May 2000 for independence. However, it was indicated that the PLO's Central Council is to decide on a possible unilateral declaration, depending on the composition of Barak's government. In this context, it has been stated that

if the Barak government believes in peace, this could encourage the Palestinians to give a chance to negotiate with Israel for a reasonable period of time for independence declaration, close to what the Americans and the Europeans advised.

In the light of the developments following Israeli election, it was widely felt that Barak's overwhelming victory clearly indicates that Israelis opted for peace with proper security. That peace with security is not only immediately valid for both Israelis and Palestinians but also, in the context of comprehensive Middle East peace and security, for all the peoples of the region — the Arabs and the Israelis alike.

The mood in the region has drastically altered. The bulk of the population in quite a constant way is wanting to pursue diplomacy if that can heal centuries of ethnic animosity. The idea of rethinking and reformulating historic experiences is finding a unique dimension in the new Israel.

TOM & JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

James Bond
BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK

