

## LETTER FROM AMERICA

## Why is it So Difficult to Plead Ignorance, or to be Honest?

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

**The opposition party in Bangladesh was absolutely correct in demanding that issues of paramount national importance, such as transhipment of Indian goods through Bangladeshi territory, should be debated in the parliament. However, it is hypocritical of the opposition to boycott the parliamentary session where the issue was slated for discussion. The opposition cannot have it both ways - they cannot blame the government for not discussing the issue in the parliament, and then boycott the session where it was supposed to be discussed!**

**A**s a child, the writer was intrigued by an arithmetic problem the teacher had posed for the class, straight out of "Baito Shikshika". It began: "How much water does a businessman have to add to a maund of milk" to make certain amount of profit. Being young and daft, some of us were thinking: "Isn't it dishonest to dilute milk with water for profit?" Were we to articulate such reservations, the teacher would have certainly accused us of mathematical incompetence, and with a cold stare shut us up, or worse. In Bangladesh, teaching is a one way street; there's little scope for back and forth dialogue. That was our first lesson in "Bhejaal" (adulteration).

A few years later, in our Bangla class, the teacher read the story of two learned men belonging to two different villages. Each village was convinced that their pundit was superior. To settle the issue once and for all, the villagers got the pundits to agree to a head-to-head intellectual confrontation in front of the masses of the two villages. Pundit No. 2 asked Pundit No. 1 what "horns of dilemma" meant. Fortunately, No. 1 pundit knew the answer ("ubhyo shonkhat"). With his turn, pundit No. 1 asked a very simple question: "Please tell everyone what 'I don't know' means." Very confidently, the No. 2 pundit shouted: "Ami Jani Na." Village number 1 erupted in rancorous applause, and in a wild celebration carried their hero off. Dejected, village No. 2 left their pundit to wallow in humiliation.

Some of us had a problem with the moral of the story. We were thinking: Wait a minute, No. 2 pundit had answered correctly! No. 1 pundit had taken advantage of the villagers' ignorance of English language to claim victory, knowing full well that he had cheated! Therefore, why is No. 1 everyone's hero? He is the real villain! That was our first lesson in intellectual dishonesty!

Is it not possible that when children are weaned on such contaminated intellectual diet, they may grow up to exhibit the

same traits? Look at the behaviour of some of our grown-ups vis-a-vis recent events mirrors some of these deficiencies.

We have tremendous respect for our own selves, but are reluctant to extend an iota of courtesy to others. We are so garrulous in criticism of others, yet it breaks our jaw to praise an individual. Denigration of a fellow writer with unproven blanket statements, for the sole purpose of one-upmanship, is not necessarily a virtue! Oh, the perils of limited knowledge!

In reading Rabindranath or Shakespeare are we not better off being dazzled by their brilliance, rather than nit-picking for blemish in the gem?

We are naturally proud of what we do, and believe we do a pretty good job at it. We should rightly feel offended if someone tells us what to do. The flip side of that is we too should desist from telling others what THEY should do. Unless someone is in the same profession as the writer, it is a fairly good bet that were he or she to tell the writer what the writer should do in his field of expertise, he or she would look silly. It is perfectly legitimate for a nation to tell its armed forces how much money the nation can afford to spend on defence. Unless someone is an expert on defence, we would be overstepping our bounds and looking really silly if we were to tell the forces what hardware they should buy, and what they should not. Why pretend to be knowledgeable, when there is no harm in being ignorant?

We may agree or disagree with one or more of our Prime Minister's decisions, or be disappointed with her choice of words; but it is none of our business to TELL her what she should do. Were we to be that haughty, we would not only be exceedingly rude to madam Prime Minister, we would also be insulting fellow Bangladeshi who elected her the head of the government.

The opposition party in Bangladesh was absolutely correct in demanding that issues of paramount national importance, such as transhipment of Indian goods through Bangladeshi territory, should be debated in the parliament. However, it is hypocritical of the opposition to boycott the parliamentary session where the issue was slated for discussion.

The opposition cannot have it both ways - they cannot blame the government for not discussing the issue in the parliament, and then boycott the session where it was supposed to be discussed! If they were honest, they would have recorded their dissension in the parliament.

Collective punishment is

contrary to every tenet of civilized behaviour. The government has the right to go after criminal elements in the Bustees, or to question the legality of the Bustees in the first place.

However, no one in government has the right to demolish entire Bustees because of few resident criminals, intimidate the writ petitioner who challenged the

government's forced eviction of the slum dwellers, or the High Court that initially passed the order of stay till the disposal of the writ petition. There are reports that makeshift slums were built around the Supreme Court and the petitioner's house by the terrorists at the government's instigation! Such behaviour is unbecoming of a civilized government. If we do not have an independent judiciary, we have the law of the jungle!

Honesty, integrity, respect for the law and other fellow Bangladeshi, and above all unadulterated education are what we need to sweep away society's malaise. A little humility helps an individual and the nation enormously, as does appreciation of one's own limitations.

Was it not Sir Isaac Newton, one of the most learned persons of all time, who had lamented that he knew so little? Clearly, it takes quite a bit of knowledge to plead ignorance!

**Stop the Brutality in East Timor Indonesia!**

EVER since Indonesia invaded East Timor, nine days after the East Timorese declared independence from Portugal in 1975, there has been nothing but trouble for both Indonesia and the East Timorese.

Indonesia does not have a legitimate claim on the half-island. The Portuguese settled the island in 1520, converting the local population to Catholic-

ism. The people of East Timor have spoken. Indonesia should respect their wishes and get out of East Timor before its international image is tarnished further. You cannot go back on your word, President Habibie!

## Transhipment Facility to India: Coinciding

## Views for and Against

By A B M S Zahur

**Transhipment issue must be discussed thoroughly in the parliament. We the common men would like to know the points for opposing the treaty and the ruling party's points for justifying their proposal for the treaty. We need friendship, we also need economic development but not at the cost of conceding our national interest or jeopardising our national security.**

**T**HE people of Bangladesh in general understand the benefit of good neighbourly relationships with India, Nepal, Bhutan or Myanmar without much political propaganda. The trading groups particularly welcome any development in this regard because appreciable and rapid expansion of trading activities are possible only when good relationships exist among the states concerned. However, despite this possibility of trade benefits, no patriotic trader would want to sacrifice national interest for his personal gain.

On three sides we are surrounded by India, our biggest neighbour. Because of our unhappy experiences in the follow-up of some important agreements in the past naturally we have to be extremely cautious in our future approach to any treaty or dialogue with India. Thus it is desirable to proceed slowly toward any treaty with India because in our overzealousness for a possible impressive gain we may end up being a big loser permanently. We must never be carried away due to the fact that India helped us liberate our country from Pakistan. India was guided by its own national interest in its participation in Bangladesh's struggle for freedom rather than any other consideration. Though Indian attitude to derive all the benefits from the neighbour ultimately proved harmful for her, she couldn't get herself to bring about any change in her attitude. Her failure to change attitude may prove to be a great hindrance to realising her dream of becoming at least the second major power in Asia though her per capita income to date remains at US \$390 only with illiteracy rate at 48 per cent. Apart from her stupendous task of transforming an impoverished nation of 1 billion people into an

economically viable one, she will have to tackle the great trouble in Kashmir in the northwestern front and increasing insurgency in the NEFA region in the eastern front.

India will only be successful in developing confidence and trust among her neighbours if she is prepared to consider their interests also. Though in allowing transit facility to Bangladesh and Nepal or Bangladesh and Bhutan she may lose financially (we are not aware of the amount), she may nevertheless be able to make up for such loss if she can have the transhipment facility through Bangladesh which had already allowed her transit facility through the river route.

Bangladesh cannot afford to live in isolation. It is time we changed our attitude. If we are to participate in the global development process (keeping our national interests in view) we shall have to give more attention toward sub-regional and regional development.

Awami League deserves credit in improving Bangladesh's relationship with Myanmar. In the past we never gave enough attention toward developing better relationships with our next door neighbours. In fact we only concentrated on developing better relationships with rich Islamic countries and the countries of the developed world.

Bangladesh's active participation in the recently concluded conference participated by India, China, Myanmar is an appropriate step toward the development effort.

The issue of extending transhipment facility to India is far from simple. Without an in-depth study of this complex issue no effective decision is possible.

First of all we should see whether we are capable of handling movement of 4 million tons of goods on the existing

roads, to what extent would our own transport system be affected, how to ensure road safety, how to ensure that sealed containers do not contain explosives or arms, whether perishable goods will be included among the items to be transported, who should compensate in case of accidents, what would be the payment schedule, who should provide money for infrastructural development and transport vehicles.

After the first step we may go for further discussion in regard to its implication in the development of sub-regional trade.

From Bangladesh's point of view the question of Bangladesh-Nepal and Bangladesh-Bhutan trade development through obtaining transit facility from India must be raised and should be made a part of the Bangladesh-India transhipment deal.

Both Bangladesh and India will have to consider the fact that both Bhutan and Nepal are landlocked and as such deserve special treatment.

From granting transit facility to Nepal or Bhutan India may not be the ultimate loser because on the one hand it will relieve Calcutta port from extra pressure and on the other hand, financial loss due to loss of royalty may be completely wiped out from the benefit to be accrued from the transhipment facility that Bangladesh may extend.

In this regard BNP's politics appears to be intriguing and

confusing. During the regimes of Ziaur Rahman and Khaleda Zia BNP never opposed the concept of extending transit facility to India. Its India phobia and fear of loss of sovereignty suddenly prompted it to oppose any friendly gesture by Awami League to India.

Transhipment issue must be

discussed thoroughly in the parliament. We the common men would like to know the points for opposing the treaty and the ruling party's points for justifying their proposal for the treaty. We need friendship, we also need economic development but not at the cost of conceding our national interest or jeopardising our national security.

The author is a retired joint secretary Govt. of Bangladesh.

**Tom & Jerry**



**James Bond**  
BY IAN FLEMING  
DRAWING BY NORAK



## Recalling a Legend of the Liberation War

by Mustafa Hossain

**M** Noorul Quader, a great freedom fighter, a direct witness to many yet unknown chapters of our liberation war died of massive cardiac arrest at a seaside restaurant in Brighton, UK on September 13, 1998.

The

sun finally set on the Portuguese colonial empire in 1975 when Mozambique and Angola became independent in Africa. Sensing an opportunity, the East Timorese too declared independence, inviting an invasion from its bigger neighbour, who made East Timor Indonesia's 27th province. Indonesia's annexation of East Timor had the tacit approval of the United States and Australia.

Indonesia's role in East Timor has been less than honourable from the beginning. They found it extremely difficult, therefore resorted to brutal means, to subdue a small, but persistently hostile Catholic population. East Timor proved to be an international headache for former Indonesian President Suharto. His successor, B. J. Habibie, offered East Timor a plan for autonomy inside Indonesia. If they rejected it, Indonesia would become independent, he promised. Last week 78.5 per cent of East Timorese voted for independence.

In the aftermath of the vote, irregular militias backed by the Indonesian military are carrying out an organized campaign of terror that involves widespread killing, arson and the forced evacuation of tens of thousands from the remote territory of 800,000 people inhabiting an area one-tenth the size of Bangladesh. It is unclear whether the current violence is an attempt to somehow turn back history, to seek some sort of bargaining power in new East Timor, to send a warning to other separatist movements or simply to wreck vengeance.

The people of East Timor have spoken. Indonesia should respect their wishes and get out of East Timor before its international image is tarnished further. You cannot go back on your word, President Habibie!

The money with which he first established the Bangladesh Treasury. This money helped pay for the costs of War of Liberation.

Noorul Quader considered the liberation war as the most important chapter of his life. He regarded every single freedom fighter as responsible for all arrangements of the oath taking ceremony of the Mujibnagar Government. On April 17th 1971, when the Mujibnagar Government took oath, he was there not only as the Noorul Quader Khan, DC Pabna, but as a jubilant freedom fighter armed with weapons of war and back from a battlefield. He was surrounded by his group of victorious freedom fighters also responsible for the security of the oath-taking programme.

On 24 April 1971, Noorul Quader was appointed the first Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh in exile and was assigned by the then Cabinet of Tajuddin Ahmed to set up the administrative machinery. He set up the civil administration of Bangladesh and gave appointment to all other top offices there. He was also the Secretary of the Youth Camp, which was responsible for the recruitment and training of Mukti Joddha during 1971. Around 106 camps were set up and training of over 120,000 Mukti Joddha was carried out there. They formed the core of the Mukti Bahini.

Upon liberation of the country, Noorul Quader was made responsible for transferring the seat of the Government of Bangladesh from Mujibnagar to Dhaka. On 18th December 1971, Noorul Quader came to Dhaka as the First Establishment Secretary, bringing the Government of Bangladesh with him. Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed selected him not only to take the Government to Dhaka but also to carry with him the spirit of the Liberation War.

Noorul Quader is one of the greatest freedom fighters our nation has produced to have fought both in the battlefield in direct armed combats as well as with the pen with which he helped kill the Pakistani Administration, by officially starting and steering the functioning of the Mujibnagar Government of Bangladesh.

Noorul Quader was the first civil servant to dive into the bloody struggle of independence and emerge drenched in the spirit of the Liberation War. Even before the people and officials of the then East Pakistan had been able to embrace the reality of a liberated and fully independent country emerging, Noorul Quader had liberated Pabna, started a government and established to the world the reality of an independent Bangladesh. In the process, Noorul Quader became a legend of the Liberation War.

He not only revolted to the mass killing of the Bengali people, but also against the attack of the Pakistanis on the customs and culture of the Bengal nation. It was deeply related to his soul and self-identity. His hatred of the "Khan Bahini", as the Pakistani Army was referred to, made him even give up his own family title 'Khan' making him simply Noorul Quader.

Noorul Quader considered the liberation war as the most important chapter of his life. He regarded every single freedom fighter from the depth of his soul. Even though he never tried to promote himself and his contribution to the nation, the spirit of the Liberation War remained deeply rooted in his mind. Thus being a Mukti Joddha myself, I wanted to dedicate my book on the War of Independence to him. Listening to this he told me that he would be present in the publication programme. Today I can only feel anguish at the thought that, the publication programme would take place, but Mr Quader to whom the book would be dedicated would not be there. Yet the spirit of the Liberation War which shone like an immortal flame in the heart of Noorul Quader will forever continue to inspire the Bengali nation.

Noorul Quader was laid to eternal rest at the Shaheed Buddhiji-Mukti Joddha Graveyard in Mirpur. It was the very least the nation could do for him. Yet it is a loss to the nation that many important facts about the War and the government during its period of conception at the hands of Noorul Quader have been lost forever with him. Who else is there to tell us about the untold chapters of the Liberation War and help us distinguish between the truths and the half-truths?

## Mahathir's Malaysia at Crossroads

by A S M Nurunnabi

**Building Putrajaya despite the financial crisis confirms that one man can triumph over global markets, over the so-called free-market experts. Mahathir hopes to rekindle all the Malay-pride projects slowed or stalled by the Asian crisis, including the world's tallest building, the world's longest bridge and Cyberjaya, a Malaysian Silicon Valley, also carved out of the palm plantations. It could all happen, unless, of course, Mahathir is surprised at the polls by the opposition, which wants to cancel megaprojects as too grand.**

**T**HERE are yet no definite indications as to the direction Malaysia's political future will take following the upcoming general elections. Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been in an upbeat mood with the completion of his grand project of building Malaysia's new capital at Putrajaya. To many Putrajaya will be remembered as the crowning achievement of Mahathir's 18-year reign. Mahathir seemed serene in the belief that he has survived his one-man battle against the worst financial crisis to strike Asia since World War II. While collapsing currencies "humiliated" rulers and tycoons across the region, Mahathir said he attacked. He denounced the "colonial" Western powers exploiting the crisis to "take control" of Asia. He said he could hold off the money traders with currency controls "indefinitely".

Previously no one could think that Mahathir could lose. No one had the power to stand up to Mahathir until he sacked his designated successor, Anwar Ibrahim, at the height of the economic crisis last September, then threw him in jail on charges of covering up an illicit relationship with his chauffeur. Anwar was convicted of the cover-up in Asia's "trial of the century".

According to observers, the on-going campaign is shaping up as a referendum on Mahathir. Even those who see Anwar as a younger, slicker version of his mentor are reportedly flocking to opposition parties. Led by the Justice Party of Anwar's wife, Azizah, the fractured opposition is calling for abolition of colonial-era security laws and the secret police. They want reform of cronyism, of the judiciary and of an electoral system that, they say, allows UMNO to marshal soldiers and their wives, even phantom and the dead, to cast votes for the ruling party. In the countryside, UMNO is labelled as a "one-stop shop" offering everything from student loans to funeral arrangements, and civil servants are said to be worried that votes for the opposition could prompt riots similar to those in Indonesia last year that resulted in the killing of ethnic Chinese and the looting of their shops. Still others are believed to be concerned that a strong showing by Islamist elements in the polls could allow the opposition party to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state that would ban many un-Islamic practices.

But because Malaysia has no tradition of holding opinion polls, nobody knows for sure how the Chinese will vote. Interviews with a cross-section of Malaysians-Chinese reportedly confirm that the community is far from united behind the ruling coalition, which controls 84 per cent of the parliamentary seats. Many Chinese would like to reduce that giant majority and vote in a stronger opposition to keep a check on the government. It is, however, the general feeling that young voters tend to be more anti-establishment because of the Anwar incident. Now younger Chinese may identify with younger Malays. It's perceived by pro-Mahathir elements as an area of concern.

his inner sanctum in the new city of Putrajaya, Mahathir is believed to have regained control of the economy from the later-day Western "colonialists" and is confident he can micro-manage Malaysia's over-all economic policies. Everyday he meets with his National Economic Action Council and reviews every aspect of the national economy.

Building Putrajaya despite the financial crisis confirms that one man can triumph over global markets, over the so-called free-market experts. Mahathir hopes to rekindle all the Malay-pride projects slowed or stalled by the Asian crisis, including the world's tallest building, the world's longest bridge and Cyberjaya, a Malaysian Silicon Valley, also carved out of the palm plantations. It could all happen, unless, of course, Mahathir is surprised at the polls by the opposition, which wants to cancel megaprojects as too grand.